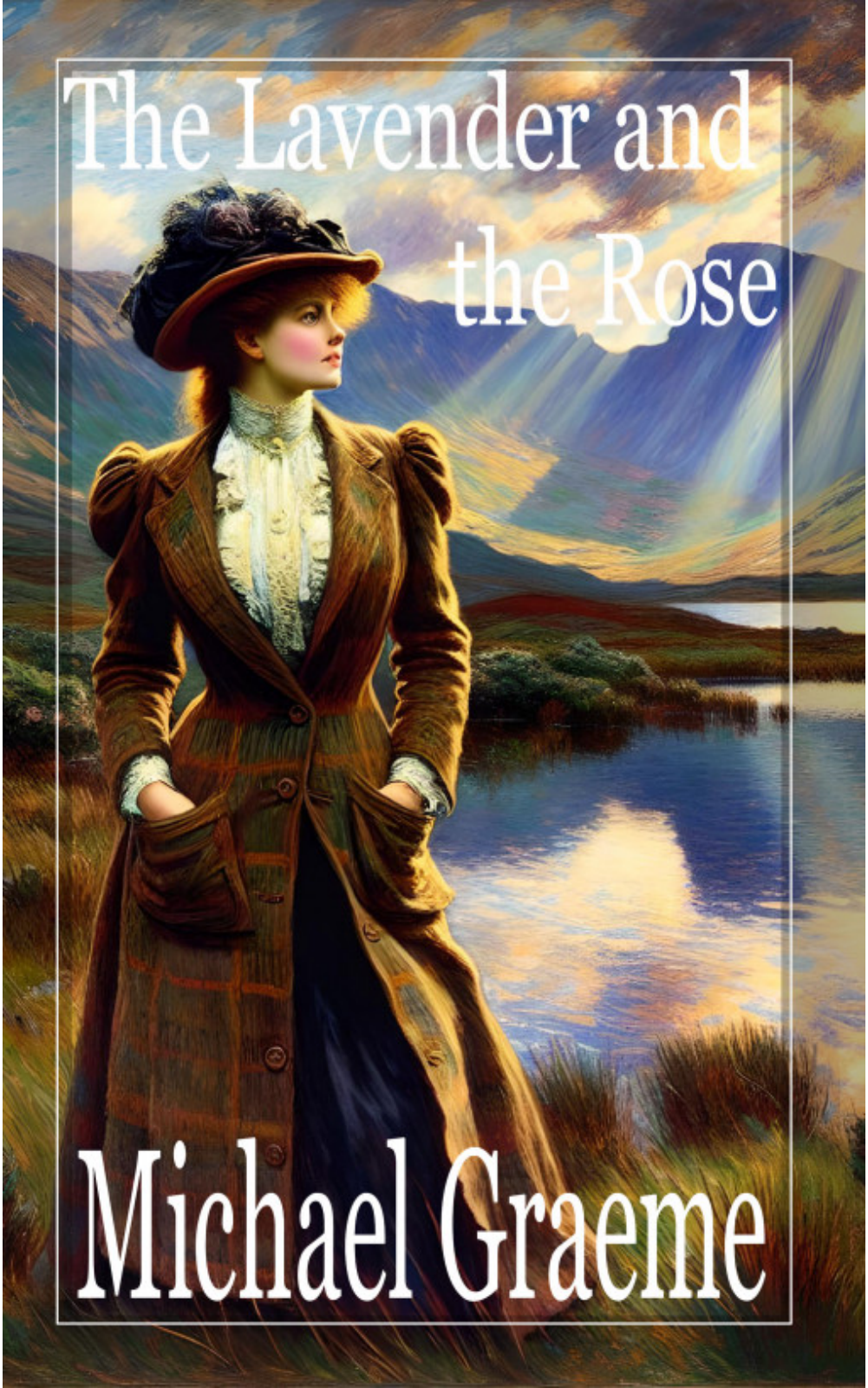
The Lavender and the Rose
Michael Graeme

# The Lavender and the Rose

by

Michael Graeme

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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The Lavender and Rose by Michael Graeme

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# Dedication

***This book is dedicated to Beatrice***

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## Book 1
## The book of times present

*The flesh endures the storms of the present alone; the mind, those of the past and future, as well as the present.*

*Thomas Hobbes*

*Philosopher 1588-1679*

*****

## CHAPTER 1

### The presence of the past

It didn't feel right, approaching the house by road, but then I hadn't supposed a man like Lamarr was up to the route on foot. We might easily have done it in an hour, taken the path across the hills, felt the wind on our faces, heard the sound of running water, but I'd taken one look at him in his pinstripe suit, and his leather soled shoes, and I hadn't even thought to suggest it.

He looked more or less like I'd imagined from our brief telephone conversation the week before, his voice slightly clipped and formal, a solicitor's voice, a pinstriped, three piece suit sort of voice:

"A delicate matter concerning your acquaintance with Mrs. Amanda Fleetwood."

Pause. Clearing of throat; then measured tones, softly sympathetic, bad news to convey. I was to see him at my earliest convenience,... and I should bring some means of identification: a passport, a driving license.

Amanda Fleetwood was dead. She'd passed away in what had sounded to me like suspicious circumstances, some six months ago now, but he assured me the police had ruled out any possibility of foul play.

"The causes were natural. Entirely natural, Mr. Rowan." And then: "It's very sad of course. She was no age. No age at all."

He drove the way he spoke, with stiff, formal movements of his body and he had an air of calm assurance, peering slightly over his nose like a headmaster on the lookout for signs of indiscipline among other road users, of whom there were few that morning. It was no quicker by car. The only road that came anywhere near the valley of Drummaurdale took us around the far side of Ullswater, a distance of some twenty miles, much of it narrow, threading between hills and meadows and forest lush with midsummer greens. It was impressive country, but we heard and felt nothing of its wildness, smelled nothing but the perfumed polish of his car's immaculate interior.

As we closed on our destination, every moment felt like the violation of an ancient precept, for in my imagination that house did not have a road linking it to the outside world at all. It existed independently, a place apart, a place that could only be entered on foot and with one's senses first purified by the breath of mountains - not that it mattered now, I supposed, for with Amanda gone, and Beatrice too, how could this place hold meaning for me any more?

The way became more tortuous by degrees and less well maintained as we drove on past the last lonely farm,... the last telephone. Here there were great swells in the tarmac as grass and reeds strained to burst through from beneath. It was lonely country, yes, but here also the outlines of the hills became once

more familiar to me. I saw the great grassy dome of Drummaur Fell, the rising monolith of Grey Crag, and the long ridge of the Roman Road running high above the trackless eastern valleys.

We were almost there now.

There was a gate at the end of the tarmac - closed to keep the beasts from wandering off the fell: the sheep, the deer, the wild ponies. I thought we might have left the car there, but Lamarr, fearful of rain, had me open the gate so we could drive through. We then proceeded at a walking pace, his shiny Range Rover striding cautiously over the bumps and hollows of the track. And so, somewhat ponderously, we skirted the open fell and finally drew up within sight of the wood that encircled the house.

"It's a queer old place," he said at last, as if to soften me up for the shock of it. "Very old fashioned."

He stepped out of the car and looked around at the hills. We were in the midst of them here, a ring of two thousand footers crowned with fine outcrops of shattered black rock - perfectly sculpted to comb the wind; to make it moan. Lamarr seemed to shudder at the sound as if it were the baying of wolves.

"And it's terribly remote." he went on, again by way of warning.

"Lonely, yes," I replied.

The hills did not move him, I thought. He lived and worked in the middle some of the finest scenery in England, yet I fancied his eyes were rarely lifted above the plane of his desktop.

"I don't know how she managed for so long out here on her own," he went on. "Its so,... so,..." he searched for the right adjective, finally settling on 'inconvenient'.

"She did manage though," I reminded him.

He conceded that she had indeed managed - managed quite well in fact. "It's a question of getting used to it, I suppose,... of not minding,... of not missing life's little luxuries." He wrinkled his nose as if not quite believing his own sentiments.

"May I ask, when did you last see her, Mr Lamarr?"

"It was shortly before she died. We had lunch. She seemed perfectly well. It was very sad, Mr. Rowan. Very sad."

"I suppose you found me through her letters. I haven't seen her for a long time, but we wrote regularly. As her executor you must have come across letters,... they might have seemed a little strange."

Lamarr half closed his eyes and gave a faint smile, a gesture of reassurance, of discretion. "There were letters, yes, quite illegible I have to say. I did try to decipher them in case they were pertinent to her estate, but they were beyond me, like a foreign language, foreign symbols, hieroglyphs - but neither Greek,

nor Russian. Very puzzling! You were the author of those letters?"

"It was a personal code,..." I said, wondering how to even begin explaining the inexplicable. "A romantic sort of thing, between me and her."

Again the faint smile, the half closing of his eyes. "I understand, Mr. Rowan. But it wasn't through the letters I found you. I'm sorry. I should have told you before now. You are a beneficiary. You were named in her will."

He looked at me then, studied me for a reaction. How many times had he told someone that, I wondered? You are a beneficiary,... pause for scrutiny,... for analysis. "Shall we go inside?"

He led me into the wood, along the tunnelled path through which we could see the garden gate. Beyond it was the blue grey slate of the house itself, and the green front door - images first seen one clear spring morning a decade ago. It was coming back now, memories I thought I'd laid to rest, but I felt a terrible pressure in my chest, something trying to burst free, and I hung back, afraid I could not bring myself to cross the threshold into that strange world again.

Lamarr prattled pompously, not yet aware that I was shrinking ever further behind. "It needs an awful lot of work to bring it up to standard of course," he was saying. "It must be freezing here in Winter. And of course the road, such as it is, gets blocked at the first hint of bad weather."

Incongruous in his suit, he produced an impressive bunch of keys and proceeded to try the lock, but to his surprise found the door already open. He walked in, and I followed, half closing my eyes as the breath of the place took me. Then I nearly ran into the back of him when he pulled up sharp. I was confused at first and thoroughly self absorbed, so I did not immediately register what he was staring at. Slowly, I followed his gaze and it was then I saw her: a woman, standing at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the banister rail.

She was in her early thirties perhaps, dressed in the long tweed skirt and the blouse I remembered Beatrice wearing that first night long ago. She even wore the little silver clasp at her throat, a string of pearls hanging over the jut of an ample bosom. Her hair was long and dark, and tied up in the Edwardian fashion, exactly as Beatrice's had been. The look of her, the feel, the mood of the woman in this house,... it was startling and for an instant my heart leaped to an inevitable conclusion. It had all been a mistake! Beatrice was alive! She was there, waiting to welcome me back, about to smile in greeting,... except Beatrice would have been much older now,... like me.

The colour had completely drained from Lamarr's face and I guessed he was thinking the same. The woman, for a moment, seemed similarly transfixed by us, but then she let out a startling growl, cat like, primitive, and she sprang at us, bowling us aside like skittles before making her escape through the open door. As she passed, I felt a tremendous strength and a heat, and I caught the

scent of soap, of lavender. My God - the scent of Beatrice! But above all, even in the violence of the moment, I had felt the cool, starchy smoothness of her blouse upon my skin and then my heart had folded upon itself, leaving me numb with a shock that ran far deeper than Lamarr could ever have guessed.

I was too shaken by it to even think of chasing her, always supposing I could have run more than a hundred yards in the first place. Instead I gazed out as she tore down the path, the heavy skirt held high, her legs bare and efficiently muscular, like a hill runner's, like a wild animal's. She looked back once, as her hair fell, and a single beam of sunlight cut clean through the dross of decades to illuminate her face, to still my heart.

I wanted to say that I knew this woman, that I had known her all my life, known her for many lives, but clearly I did not know her at all.

## CHAPTER 2

### The legacy of Beatrice

It had begun with news of Amanda's death. This had taken some time to sink in, and the experience was unlike anything I'd known because Amanda had never been a real person to me, only a figure half glimpsed, like a stranger through frosted glass. It was Beatrice I had loved and Beatrice whose unacceptable loss I had struggled with. Before driving up to Westmorland that time to meet with Lamarr, I had come to the conclusion the purpose of my journey was to bear witness to the ending of an era, and a period of great mystery, one the tides of change had decided to dissolve, without revealing much by way of answers.

I knew now that was not what any of this meant at all. It was not the end of anything, but a new course whose purpose I could discern no more clearly than when it had begun ten years ago. It seemed unlikely, I know, but the strangeness of the circumstances and the trembling in my heart confirmed that all of this was indeed the case, and that I had better prepare myself for what was coming.

"My God," said Lamarr. "For a moment there I thought,..."

"I know,... me too. She gave me quite a shock. Are you all right?"

Lamarr's shirt tails were hanging below his waistcoat and his tailored trousers had ridden up his legs to reveal a good six inches of hairy shin. It would have been funny had he not looked so very pale. He dusted himself down and covered up his embarrassment with a show of false indignation.

"This is very distressing. Whoever that was, I'll find out, make no mistake,... no mistake, Mr Rowan!"

I gazed around. The place did not appear to have been ransacked. It was neat and clean, as if it were still lived in and had not stood empty for six months.

"Nothing seems to have been disturbed, Mr Lamarr. What about papers? Money?"

"I have Mrs Fleetwood's legal documents at the office, and what little cash she appears to have kept here. But the rest, all her personal things, her possessions, her clothes, are all as they were."

Lamarr began tapping the buttons on his mobile, trying to get through to the local police, some twenty miles away. "Damn and blast the thing. We must be in a dead zone. I don't understand how she got in. The lock hasn't been forced and I'm certain I left everything secure the last time I was here. Certain, Mr Rowan!"

"There used to be a key in a niche of the wall by the gate, I recall - Mrs

Fleetwood might not have mentioned that to you. It's feasible the woman - the intruder - could have used it, if she'd known where to look."

"Then we need to get a joiner up here. We'll have to change the lock,... Damn this telephone. Damn the woman. The whole country's riddled with thieves. With thieves, Mr Rowan. I had thought that out here we might be spared the moral decay of our times!"

"This doesn't feel like a robbery, Mr Lamarr. This feels like - I don't know - something else entirely"

Lamarr was still flustered and I began to realise his distress was genuine. "She was wearing Mrs Fleetwood's things," he said. "She ran off in them."

"I know. That was curious - seeing her dressed that way. But we disturbed her, frightened her. She couldn't very well have undressed before running off could she? Did she leave her own clothes here, I wonder? Perhaps we should look. They might give us some clues as to her identity."

"Her own clothes? What do you mean?"

"What she was wearing just now - they were not the sort of clothes one would wear out and about, wouldn't you say? It was more of a costume, authentic to the last stitch, I'd say, the kind of things Beatrice wore when she lived here. So, perhaps, whoever our intruder was, she came just to dress up in them,... to pretend."

Lamarr was looking at me as if I'd lost my mind. "To pretend what?"

"Well, to pretend to be Beatrice." Even as I spoke these words I knew how odd they sounded. Yet what other explanation was there?

"I'm sorry, Mr Rowan, you're losing me. Who is Beatrice?"

"I mean Amanda. Forgive me; Beatrice was another name I knew her by - an affectionate name, a nickname, you understand?"

"I see. But why would anyone want to dress up as a dead woman?" He shuddered. "I've never heard anything like it. It's too gruesome."

"We should check anyway," I said. "We talked about the letters; it would be unfortunate if any had gone missing. Perhaps you could look in the desk. I'll check the kitchen,... and upstairs."

But I was not really concerned about the letters. I would have been embarrassed to think of anyone else reading them, for they were sexually intimate, but if their language had defeated Lamarr, I was sure they would not be understood by anyone else, barring an expert on ciphers, of whom there were not likely to be many thereabouts.

I watched for a moment while he began a delicate and respectful search of the roll-top desk. It was the desk at which I had imagined her sitting all those years, looking out upon the hills, and writing her letters to me, a language only we had understood, a language she had taught me in this very room, a

language whose every arcane symbol bore a hint of the essence of this place.

Leaving him to it, I made my way along the broad passage and glanced into the kitchen. There, the cast iron range was hissing contentedly, a kettle about to boil, a pitcher of fresh milk on the table. None of this struck me as outrageous, as an affront to my memories. I tried to whip up some anger but it wouldn't come. Indeed, I found myself inexplicably comforted by it all. The range was the heart of the house. When it died, the house also died, but with experience and measured attention, it could be kept going indefinitely, instinct drawing one back to toss on a log, to rake the embers, to empty the ash. Evidently our intruder knew about such things.

And the clock, the great beast of a thing with its soporific ticking was precisely fifty minutes slow, and therefore exactly as it should have been. Trembling a little I took the watch from my pocket, the watch that had last been set to this clock a decade ago, both of them reassuringly out of time. All was as it should have been, and exactly as I had imagined it. Thinking back, to have entered Cragside that day and found it dead and cold, would have been devastating. It would have been the end of everything, when in fact it seemed as if the house were merely waiting for my return.

I paused for a moment, my hand on the banister, as I gazed upstairs to the landing with its spidery Aspidistra. It was green and healthy, receiving water, being looked after. I wiped my hand over the banister: it was clean, not a trace of dust. I placed a foot on the first step, intending to go up. The bedroom was the obvious place for a woman to change her clothes, but the memories were coming back too strongly now. The breath of it, the creak of its boards, the whispering of the range.

Lamarr found me brewing tea at the table. "Anything missing?" I asked him.

"Not that I can tell. But the stove! It's alight,..."

"Yes. It has been for ages, I'd say, judging by the cosy feel of the house. There's fresh milk in the jug, a chicken over there being readied for the oven. It seems you have a squatter, Mr Lamarr."

"Oh dear,... I do hope not. They're a devil to remove. Are there any,... em,... garments lying around?"

"I haven't looked properly. In the bedrooms possibly, but I can't bring myself to go up just now,... perhaps later."

"Are you feeling unwell? It was quite a shock."

"It's just memories. I don't know how much Mrs Fleetwood told you,... I mean about our relationship."

He made a gesture with his hands as if to say he did not know, nor did he need to know.

"It seems our squatter was kind enough to brew us a pot of tea. Do you take sugar, Mr Lamarr."

"Not usually, but on this occasion I'll make an exception."

We sat at the table drinking tea from Beatrice's fine China cups, my eye drawn once more by the banister rail that I could still see through the kitchen door. And in my mind, I could also see her, the woman, her hand upon the rail; the poise of her, the stillness - so like Beatrice! And the clothes; the fit of them; the way they held her in, held her proud and upright. I was moved by it in a way I could not fathom.

I thought of the bedroom, the scent of lavender, the scent of her, and I heard the sound of the beck, the gentle knocking of the sash in the wind, and I heard her voice calling me softly, Joshua,.... Joshua,....

Lamarr leaned forward, his brow furrowed with concern. "You've gone very pale, Mr Rowan. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'll be fine, thank you."

"Perhaps we should get down to business."

"Of course. You said I was a beneficiary. It's the letters I suppose. It was very kind of Mrs Fleetwood to think of me. Kind of you to bring me here,... to see the place again."

Lamarr shifted in his seat and cast me a guilty look. "Well," he said, "the letters are included of course. But actually Mrs Fleetwood gave instructions that the house and its contents were to be made over in your name. Really, I would not have dragged you all this way otherwise."

I looked at him for what seemed a long time, at his smooth, boyish face, at the fine blonde hair, the grey eyes. He smiled but there was something secretive, I thought, in the uneven curl of his lips.

"You mean Cragside?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have delayed so long in telling you. I wanted you to see the place first. I wasn't sure if you'd been here before. I didn't want you to come expecting - well - perhaps more than what it is."

"More?"

"As I've told you, it needs a lot of work to bring it up to scratch. There's no electricity, no gas, no telephone. Indeed in it's current condition, stuck way out here, I'm afraid it's not worth very much at all. What I'm saying is that it will need investment. Investment, Mr Rowan."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right."

"The structure is sound I'm told, but strictly nineteenth century,... and I'll bet there's not a fitting newer than late Edwardian. You might open it as a museum, if it weren't so remote,... but such as it is, it is now yours, Mr Rowan."

"I don't understand. She must have had family,... there was a husband."

"That's as may be, but her wishes were very specific."

"I can see they were. I just wasn't expecting it. Would you mind if I took a moment, outside; I feel rather hot suddenly."

Trying to mirror the restraint of this man was impossible. I wanted to cry, I wanted to run up the fell-side until my heart burst. I wanted to lay down beside the memory of Beatrice and will myself to die because there could be no life without her. But life refused to be budged and there were things to be discussed, to be thought through calmly and rationally.

I needed some air.

I found the gardens overgrown, the lawns like wild meadows, the beds and borders bursting with lavender, with dianthus and rosemary, all competing with opportunist weeds blown in from the valley. I sought the beck, the little shingle bank on the fringe of the surrounding wood, where I recalled sitting years ago, regarding the house with its backdrop of oak and beech, the soaring fell beyond, clouds tearing and rippling over its upper folds. Then I took from my pocket the pebble of pink veined quartz that I'd plucked from the clear water, while sitting here, that first spring morning.

What had she been thinking? I was nothing to her,... it was Joshua she had loved.

## Chapter 3

### The world collides

We stayed no more than an hour, Lamarr being anxious to return to the office so we could sort out the necessary papers and begin the process of having the deeds made over in my name. We searched the dry stone wall around the gate for the spare key but found nothing, so Lamarr left the house by the back door, making sure the front was barred from the inside, so even if the intruder had the key, she would be unable to get in again.

I had suggested we might leave the door unbarred, for if she could not get in, then how could she return Beatrice's things? He had thought my idea a bit eccentric.

"I assure you, we shall see hide nor hare of those things again. Hide nor hare, Mr Rowan!"

He had also damped the fire down in the grate. It would burn itself out in a matter of hours, the heat and the life of the place ebbing away with the dying of the embers. I suppose these were all sensible precautions, but the house was like no other, and normal rules did not apply, though it would have been hopeless to have tried explaining all of this to him. I remember hoping instead, as we returned to his car, that the woman might have had a key to the back door as well, then she could slip in and re-light the fire, keep the place warm, keep it alive. I could not explain any of this even to myself, other than except perhaps that a part of me was denying the simple truth of Beatrice's death, that I was projecting something onto the stranger that she did not, in reality, possess at all.

We returned to Windermere in the early afternoon. It's narrow streets were crowded with vehicles, its pavements solid with a crush of pedestrians - locals and tourists alike, buzzing around the shops and cafe's. There was an anxious, frantic air to their movements, a panic to get the last of everything; the last parking space, the last vacancy in the B+B, the last newspaper from the stand. It was the atmosphere of a city, poured into the minuscule volume of a picturesque village and it had never failed to amaze me how the glorious emptiness of the fells could nestle so closely with these commercially crammed towns.

Lamarr had an office above an estate agent's on the main thoroughfare. As we walked by the window, I saw houses for sale at mind boggling prices, all of them businesses: bed and breakfast places, small hotels, holiday cottages. It made me wonder where people actually lived if every available roof was now simply a means of making money. And what would be left for the tourists to see anyway if every building they looked upon was just another hotel?

A middle aged blonde with big lips waved to Lamarr from within. He registered her with nothing more than a sideways motion of his eyes, but I sensed at once there was something between them.

His offices were small - a reception area with a secretary, his own private office, a filing room and a lavatory, all thrust high in the eaves so that the beams came right down to shoulder level. The effect was at the same time claustrophobic and giddying, as if we were in a box perched at the top of a tall tower. There was an all pervading smell of percolated coffee, and then a sweeter, gentle fragrance belonging to the secretary. We settled in his office with coffee. There were piles of bound papers everywhere, mountains of them, an air of chaos about the room that surprised me, because Lamarr had seemed like a man for whom precision and order were paramount.

"So, Mr Rowan, have you thought about what you intend to do?"

"About?"

"Well, the house,... bearing in mind the investment you require,... or perhaps I could be of assistance in selling it on,..."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want to sell it."

"Then you have a plan?"

"Not exactly. Not long term. But I have the feeling I would like to live there, at least for a little while."

He looked crestfallen. "Are you sure? Have you thought this through? Have you considered the dreadful isolation,... the complete lack of services?"

"Yes, I've thought about that."

"But how would you make a living?... I presume you work?"

"I was a programmer, but I'm, well, scraping by on other means now. I imagine the house would be cheaper to run than my own - I mean with so few services, the property tax must be very low,... if anything at all. And without a mortgage, my outgoings would be halved."

"But I don't imagine there's much call for computer programmers around here, Mr Rowan,... at least not within commuting distance of Cragside."

"You're probably right, but I'm out of date with computers anyway. The systems I worked on are long obsolete. I don't know what I'll do. I shall sell my house. Prices are quite high at the moment and the market is buoyant, as they say,... I should be able to sell it quickly. I can pay off what I owe, then with the capital, I dare say I could manage, if I lived modestly."

I had not thought any of this through. I was making it up as I went along, formulating my life's plan on the hoof in Lamarr's office, brushing aside the practicalities and thinking only that she had wanted me to have it - not to sell, but to live in. To somehow continue the fantasy without her!

*But it means nothing without you Beatrice,... nothing!*

Of course, I sensed Lamarr had designs on the house himself. Every disused outbuilding, every bankrupt farm, no matter how remote, was ripe for

redevelopment as tourist accommodation. That was why he'd taken me out to see it, to disappoint me with allusions to its terminal decrepitude, before telling me it was mine. Perhaps he had plans to arrange its purchase by his estate agent friend, downstairs. There would be some joint investment,... the guts of the house ripped out for the sake of a television and an immersion heater,... a tidy business as yet another holiday cottage - rural location,... tranquil setting, would suit fell walkers,... seekers of solitude.

I fancied all these things were passing before his eyes as he looked at me. He might have frowned at the dashing of such plans, but instead he smiled, a genuine smile, I thought. Professional. Magnanimous.

"Then I wish you well, Mr. Rowan. And if I can be of any assistance in the sale of your own house,...."

I'd already disappointed him enough that day, so I agreed. "Yes,... thank you. And possibly if you could also advise me on investing the capital, when the time comes."

"I'd be most happy to, Mr. Rowan."

That was it then. My life was changing course. I felt it like a tug on the wire connecting me to things. "Over here now," it was saying. "But why?" I thought. "What on earth does any of this mean?"

The business took no more than half an hour but he seemed anxious not to break our acquaintance just yet and proposed we went for a late lunch at a local hotel - he just had one 'phone call to attend to first. Of course by now I suspected there was always going to be a motive behind anything Lamarr offered to do, but for all that I was beginning to find his company congenial, so I agreed and he asked me if I'd be so kind as to wait in his reception room.

His secretary was a small, mature, mousy woman, rather stern of countenance who sat well hidden behind her computer monitor. She did not acknowledge my presence, nor even greet me with anything other than a brief and somewhat ambiguous tightening of her facial muscles. There were the usual selection of ancient magazines: cars and boats and celebrities, to which I was drawn after some ten minutes of staring at the magnolia walls. They all seemed the same I thought, leafing through them idly, articles on nothing very much squashed in between reams of lifestyle advertisements. The magazines tried to convince me that my existence had no meaning unless I wore that particular wristwatch, drove a car that performed in a particular way, went for my holidays to a particular destination, and my wife or girlfriend had a figure of those particular proportions.

It was an interesting concept, I thought - blatantly false of course - but as a means of perpetually pacifying us, it was a method that had stood the test of time,... all of us locked into a dream of eventual satisfaction, but one gained through a system geared towards delivering only a state of permanent dissatisfaction. The magazines looked old and jaded and they sickened me,...

memories of dentists waiting rooms perhaps? Or was it something else? God forbid it was that old business starting up all over again. Ghita had said it would, that once you had tasted it, once you had touched the truth, even if you did not want to believe in it, it would always come back at you - again and again, until you embraced it.

I was aware of the door opening. Then, a man whom I took to be another client, walked in. I did not pay him much attention, and after a brief glance I returned my gaze to the bit of carpet between my feet. I remembered reading how Aldous Huxley had once looked closely at the ridged pattern in the weave of his trouser leg and suddenly seen in them a truth as profound as any revealed in meditation, so I tried to find it in the industrial grade weave of the beige carpet tile.

Of course there were no answers there and anyway my efforts were interrupted when a pair of shoes entered my field of vision. They were brown brogues, a little tired and in want of polish, poking out from beneath a pair of hideously cheap blue, polyester trousers.

"Mr Rowan is it?"

It was a large man,... puffy, slovenly, with a stale odour about him and a badly set nose. He had a sickly complexion and a disquieting predilection for fixing you with his eyeballs. He offered me a glimpse of what I took to be a warrant card. By the door stood a uniformed policewoman, middle to late thirties, starched,... somehow pinched and severe.

"Detective Inspector Planer," announced the man. "I'd like a word."

A policeman?

I did not react immediately, but instead gazed at him, wondering more about the meaning of this strange new dynamic than what the man might possibly want with me. His tone was distinctly abrasive and I sensed unpleasantness ahead. I had done nothing wrong, but sometimes fate steps in and stirs things up in a mischievous way. His energy was strictly Yang, I thought, very strong, but indiscriminate, and without sensitivity. Such energy was the destroyer of cities, the explosive out-fall of volcanoes and the deadly storm,... things not always avoidable.

He seemed to tire of my dazed reverie and checked to see if I was still awake. "Mr Rowan?"

"Yes,.. I'm sorry," I said. "Please go on. Though, actually I'm just waiting to see Mr Lamarr."

Such energy was better met by Yin compliance, I thought, so I softened down and prepared for the wind to come howling through.

"Is Lamarr your solicitor?"

"I wouldn't say that exactly." I smiled. "Why? Am I likely to need one?" And then I thought that was too much, a bit of Yang coming back at him, a focus

only for the storm to concentrate itself upon. I had meant to lighten the atmosphere, thinking there was no need for the gravity suggested by this man's expression, but there was no response - no engagement of humour, no social intercourse,... just the penetrating stare coming back,... interrogative,... intimidating.

He made a show of hitching up his trousers, then produced a polythene bag in which there was a single sheet of paper, a photocopy of one of the many coded letters I had written to Beatrice over the years. When I saw it, my heart sank into my bowels. The police had a copy of a private, intimate letter, and now they wanted to know what it said! This devil, this storm, this indiscriminate Yang had been roaring through the cabinets and drawers of Cragside, and this piece of quiet intimacy had blown out of the window, to be grasped and gazed at by the world.

"You write this?" he asked, thrusting the paper under my nose.

What now? More Yang for him to annihilate? "Yes, I did."

"Then would you mind saving me a lot of time by telling me what it says?"

I scanned the symbols, spelling out the words slowly in my head. I had not read, nor written in this particular code for a while now. If the purpose was to be reminded of it then I would have appreciated a little more subtlety from the unknown,.. and also a little more discretion. Better to meet this thrust with a little Yang, I thought: "Actually, I'm afraid I'd mind very much."

The devil hitched up his trousers again, then homed in, stooping lower to draw his head level with mine, his eyes ludicrously snakelike and penetrating. It was a melodramatic gesture,... completely overdone, but intimidating all the same. His breath stank of stale cigarettes and his teeth were a uniform yellow. He would not live much longer, I thought and fancied I could see his flesh already disintegrating, shot with unsubtle Yang, overdone, parched, burned out and bleached.

"Are you saying you won't co-operate?"

"Not at all, it's just that it's a very personal letter, I'd be embarrassed to read it aloud. Might I ask what you're doing with it?" Balance of Yin and Yang, I thought,... keep it moving, keep it dynamic, feel the waves and react accordingly.

Then there came a familiar presence at my shoulder - Lamarr hovering and agitated. "I'm afraid I gave it to him, Mr Rowan. Well, not to this gentleman exactly. Indeed I don't know this gentleman. Erm,... you're not with the local constabulary I take it - only I didn't catch your division?"

Planer straightened himself up wearily and levelled his gaze at Lamarr, then hitched up his trousers yet again. Was this a nervous mannerism? I wondered. "Special Branch," he said. "It was passed on to us by the local plods." He tossed a scornful gesture back in the direction of the surly W.P.C., who registered this insult with a faint curling of her lip. She did not like him either,

I thought.

"Well," said Lamarr. "I've spoken at length to Mr. Rowan and I'm quite satisfied that, given the erm,... nature of his relationship with Mrs Fleetwood, the letters are, as he says, of a deeply personal and,.. erm,.. purely romantic nature."

Too much Yang, I thought. It left him open to a crushing assault.

"I'm not interested in your opinions, Mr Lamarr. If I want them I shall ask for them, but for now would you kindly piss off out of my sight."

Blistering Yang,.. too much, too much! And quite offensive as well. I felt myself becoming faint, the extraordinary energy filling the room and perceptibly increasing the pressure, making it seem smaller, making it seem as if the walls were closing in. Lamarr persisted: "It would be insensitive to insist he read it out to you here."

"Would the nick be private enough?"

At the mention of the police station, my resolve began to weaken, but Lamarr was surprisingly indignant and began to raise a good head of steam. "There has been no crime, Inspector. Nothing suspicious has occurred. I passed on copies of those letters in good faith, before the inquest into Mrs Fleetwood's death, thinking they might be pertinent. But the inquest revealed the causes were entirely natural and that there was nothing untoward in her life at all. There is no case,... no suspicion. You're six months out of date. The letters are now immaterial. Immaterial Inspector!"

Being rather slow in dealing with matters of the material world these days, it was only just dawning on me who, or to be more precise exactly *what* Detective Inspector Planer was, and I was disappointed. Having no experience in these matters, I had always imagined secret policemen to be more subtle in their appearance and their manner, that the organs of the state would be of a more gentlemanly breed - made to measure suits, Burberry raincoats and BBC accents,... friendly chaps with impeccable manners, and with whom one all too easily let down one's guard, Yin transforming into Yang and back again to suit the needs of the moment.

Lamarr also surprised me. Planer was a terrifying figure of a man, a seething, stinking devil, and yet the bumbling Lamarr had gone for him with the instinctive abandon of a terrier snapping at the tyres of a ten-ton truck. Planer remained unshaken of course. "Coded messages to remote locations make me nervous, Mr Rowan. There are people who wish to do us harm. People who wish to wipe us from the face of the earth. You do watch the news don't you?"

Sarcasm, I thought. Blistering,... withering. Yang energy was now white hot, like metal ready to melt.

"Such people hide in quiet places," he went on. "They pass each other coded messages,... like this one. They sneak and they plot. What say we turn over your house and see what we can find? See what Internet sites you're fond of

browsing - I assume you own a computer? Like pornography do you?"

I was puzzled by that. What had pornography to do with anything? Granted my home PC might have contained a few saucy pictures gleaned from the raunchier side of the Internet, but nothing to make me ashamed or fear exposure as either a prat, or a pervert. Was he projecting something of himself onto me perhaps? Did he have a peculiarity in this direction himself, one that went beyond an innocent male fascination for the unclothed female?

I thought it better not to enquire.

Lamarr was almost popping with indignation and he looked to the policewoman as if he hoped she'd call the brute off. But she was nothing, a shadow,... and clearly quite powerless. "Really, Inspector. I think you're making too much of this."

Planer ignored him. "Tell me what it says, Mr Rowan. If it's as innocent as your friend here suggests, then you've nothing to worry about and I need never speak to you again."

I could have told him, I thought. I could have made even the policewoman blush, perhaps, by the frankness of the language,... except, it would have been a violation a hundred times worse than trailing exhaust fumes into the imaginary world of Cragside that morning.

"By all means search my house," I said. "I assume you've already searched Cragside and found nothing suspicious."

"You think I won't?"

I felt a rising claustrophobia, an urge to bowl everyone aside like the woman that morning, to bolt for the door, to feel the sky over me once more and the grass beneath my feet, to redress the serious imbalance that was now directly harmful. "On the contrary. I'm sure you'll do whatever you think is necessary, and though I must admit I find your manner most intimidating, I will not tell you what's in those letters. They're very personal, very intimate letters, between me and Mrs Amanda Fleetwood."

"You think we can't decode them? You think we won't find out what's in them, Mr Rowan?"

I had led a fairly blameless life. My last contact with the police had been years ago - a ticking off for driving around with a broken brake light. The officer on that occasion had conducted himself in an open and straightforward manner, somewhat stern, but ultimately fair. This man, however, was a bully, and not a particularly intelligent one either.

"I'm sure you can. In fact I'm surprised you haven't already. I can only think such things cost money and are charged at an hourly rate, that your budget is tight perhaps and you were hoping to spend it on something else. But surely, the people who want to do us harm use codes that cannot be broken. They don't use pencil and paper and symbolic substitutions like this. Decode them if

you must, but I won't do it for you."

The Yang of D.I. Planer had encountered no channel through which it could flow successfully and I detected a hint of uncertainty, even a moment's hesitation. "And why not, I wonder?"

"I told you, it's because they're personal, and because I don't believe I have to."

Planer definitely seemed to be running out of steam. He turned to his companion and with a sigh, he motioned her through the door. "Come on then constable," he said. "We'll have to do it the hard way." And then to me, in parting: "Remember, Mr Rowan, we have our eye on you."

## Chapter 4

## The Gentle Current

Lamarr and I took a rather late lunch on the terrace of the Ash Tree Hotel, in Bowness. "The man was clearly a buffoon. A buffoon, Mr. Rowan." He shook his head in dismay. "I mean, really. The arrogance. And in my office of all places."

"But how did they know I'd be there?"

"Well, that was my doing, I'm afraid. I mentioned it to that rather surly woman constable, I mean that you were coming. She's with the local force and had an interest in the case for a while - it being on her patch, so to speak. She was merely doing her duty I suppose. I was going to tell you about it over lunch. I didn't think for a minute they'd actually want to speak to you."

"It does appear to have been something of an overreaction. And it's troubling for me, after writing a few coded love-letters to find myself on a terrorist watch list."

"Well, I suppose I can understand their curiosity, particularly in the present somewhat overcharged atmosphere,... bombs on buses, bombs on trains, and car-bombs being driven into airport foyers! Oh, Lord, whatever's the world coming to?"

"Something's breaking through, perhaps," I said.

"Hmn?"

"The world, Mr Lamarr. Something's breaking through, into the world."

"But from where? I don't follow."

"From within us - I mean collectively. All sorts of values are being rejected, though not all of us are driven to kill or even to frighten others, I suppose. Mostly we just sit and think and feel bad, feel that something's missing, that something has to change. We can't predict it, Mr. Lamarr. It's like a landslide, everything that's familiar is changing, even the ground beneath our feet. I don't know if it's for good or ill,... It seems ill at the moment, I grant you, but it may provoke a tidal wave of good, I don't know. It's hard to say, but something's definitely breaking through."

"You're a philosopher, Mr. Rowan?"

"Not at all,... merely puzzled by everything."

It was a beautiful afternoon, the sun was hot, the sky perfectly clear, a merciful breeze wafting over the terrace from the lake below. I could smell Honeysuckle and Jasmine,.... and Lavender,....

*Beatrice? Is that you?*

"Anyway, Mr. Lamarr, thank you for supporting me."

"You're very welcome. We must have laws, Mr Rowan. They are the bedrock of civilisation. I will not see them bent or broken. Mr Planer was plainly bending them. Conversely, since there is no law against private coded correspondence, and you were not under arrest, you were well within your rights to refuse him."

"Perhaps you're curious as to why Beatrice and I kept in touch that way."

"I don't need to know, Mr Rowan, though I presume it was a matter of,... shall we say discretion?"

"Partly, yes. We were both married at the time,... though neither of us happily, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Water under the bridge, Mr. Lamarr. But mainly it was just a game,... a lover's game."

I was embarrassing him now. He shifted uncomfortably. "You're married, Mr. Rowan? I hadn't considered that."

"I'm married, yes,... at least in the sense that it was never legally annulled. My wife was living in London the last I heard,... with our son. We don't keep in touch. Indeed I have no address for them any longer."

"I see."

"I don't know about Mrs. Fleetwood's husband. I know they were still together when she and I,..."

"Quite,... yes,... she was legally divorced some time ago."

"Mr. Lamarr, could I ask you about the circumstances of her death?..."

It had seemed to me an obvious thing for anyone to want to know and I had been wanting to ask all morning but he'd seemed to go out of his way to avoid actually laying the details before me. Now he appeared reluctant again, almost visibly squirming.

"Natural causes, Mr. Rowan. There was a weakness, I understand,... I forget the exact medical term, something in the brain. It was quite sudden,... and painless." He clicked his fingers for effect. "Like that, Mr. Rowan. Better than withering away in pain and old age, I suppose. The constable informed me of all this, since she knew I was acquainted with Mrs Fleetwood - the constable is not without feeling, though she does come across as being rather stern."

"The nature of her work, I suppose. Was Bea,.. I mean Amanda,... found at the house?"

He looked away, perhaps hoping I would not pursue things any further. There was clearly something about the precise circumstances that disturbed him. "No. It wasn't at the house. I suppose I should say things did at first appear,... unusual. She was found a little way from the house in fact, by a tarn - I forget

the name,... begins with a D, I think."

"Drummaur Tarn? She'd collapsed there?"

Lamarr looked stricken now, unconsciously twisting his napkin in his hands. "It sounded such a lonely place,... I can't explain it,... what was she doing there?"

I waited while he gathered himself. Surely there was more to it than he was telling me! Eventually, he looked up and smiled. It struck me then, and not for the first time that day, that he might have been in love with her. "You used to call on her, Mr. Lamarr?... I mean socially."

Perhaps he misunderstood my meaning.

"Mr Rowan,... I assure you."

"I only mention it, because when we were at the house this morning and we saw the intruder, you knew she was wearing Beatrice's things, things Beatrice only wore around that house - her *costume*."

Lamarr nodded. "Yes,... quite so, Mr. Rowan. Quite so. I must say it sounds strange to hear you calling her by that name: Beatrice. I was not aware of it, though I can imagine it now. It suits her very well, and the clothes she wore, the old house,... yes - very well indeed. I first met her when she came to me looking for advice on drawing up her will. She seemed at once a very confident and attractive woman, very smart,.... very fashionable, though conventionally dressed, I hasten to add. I found her most impressive. Most impressive, Mr. Rowan.

"Anyway, the will was a simple business,... but I took it upon myself to drive around to the house unexpectedly one morning,.. to clarify some details that I suppose could easily have waited until she was next in town. That's when I saw her,... in her costume and I realised of course that she was not an ordinary sort of person.

"She offered me tea as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I was quite perturbed by it as you can probably imagine,... it simply wasn't Amanda! Oh, I knew it was Amanda really, but it was as if she were acting out a role, a different character - perfectly pleasant,... in a way she was more serene than Amanda, who'd struck me as being very worldly and assertive - qualities I admit I quite like in a woman.

"I admit I'd taken quite a shine to her - you perhaps think it was unprofessional of me. But then seeing her like that, I realised she was not a woman to be desired exactly,... more one perhaps to be protected. I'm not a complicated man, my wife died many years ago. I simply wanted company,... not complication and there was clearly great complication in her life. So I decided to protect her in the only way I could, as a friend, and legal adviser.

"We would dine together when she came into town,... this very hotel, in fact. But I didn't go to the house again and we never spoke of our meeting there.

Indeed, I can only think of her as Amanda,... not as,..."

"As Beatrice?"

"Exactly,... and odd though it may sound, I'm coming round to the idea that we both knew two completely different women, Mr Rowan."

"Yes,.. that's it exactly. But please, tell me more about Amanda,... how did she seem to you?"

"Well, as I said, she was a most impressive lady,... a former business woman, I understand, perfectly lovely and jolly good company. But as the years went by, I have to say I noticed a change in her. She became less outgoing, as if sinking into depression. I wish there was more I could have done, but I saw her in town less and less, as I suppose she was taken over by this,.. this strange compulsion, this other character. That side of her frightened me, Mr Rowan and I can't help feeling a little angry with Beatrice, because it was Beatrice who took Amanda away, took her out of the world so to speak,... perhaps you think all this is nonsense and I'm certainly not used to talking this way."

"Please, there's no need to feel embarrassed."

I could have told him it was the world that had driven Amanda to seek retreat in the creation of Beatrice, that it was Beatrice who had enabled the consciousness she shared with Amanda to live freely to the end of her life, instead of languishing in the all too common chemically adjusted reality of our antidepressant age, that it was Beatrice who had indeed saved Amanda. But he was not ready for any of this. Nor could I have explained to him about the school of thought that teaches us how the tangible world is not really all it seems - that in some ways it is an illusion painted for us by our senses and that our absorption with this sensuality is actually the root of all our problems. These were old lessons, millennia old, from the far east, from Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist philosophy. As a western agnostic I had long struggled with such concepts because the manifest world is an illusion that has always given me a great deal of pleasure, but also, I admit, a good deal of pain as well.

Whatever the truth of the world, illusion or no, I was old enough now to have witnessed time and again how it behaves like an infinite sink for human energy, for human consciousness. No matter how hard we pursue things, they will always remain one step out of reach. No matter how much pure Yang we expend, the world will absorb it as a mere drop in an infinite ocean. So it seemed to me the D. I. Planers and the Amanda Fleetwoods, with their outwardly directed fire and ambition, faced nothing but a burning out long before their time. Better by far to balance the Yang with the Yin, to know when to march forward boldly, and when to bend with the wind.

I shuddered. My God! It was coming back,... this view, this creeping cloak, this soft armchair pressing against the backs of my legs, inviting me to sit down, to sit easy,... to let things unfold once more. There was something

moving, stirring, a connection stalking me here. I could feel it in my bones, but I refused to meet with it, this sly assassin, this closer of doors and stealer of children, this fate that had taken the purest love I had ever known - the love of a man for his child - and transformed it into something corrosive, then watched while it dissolved him.

"It's very distressing," said Lamarr. "Thinking of her ending her days like that, exposed to the elements,... and the wild creatures." He pushed his plate away in defeat, then took a sip of wine as if to wash away the taste,... and the thought. "You knew her, Mr. Rowan. You were closer to Beatrice than I ever was to Amanda. You must find it even more upsetting."

"To be honest, it hasn't hit me yet,..." I said, feeling that any time soon it probably would. "But we mustn't dwell on her mortal remains - really they don't mean that much. Everything she was passed from her the instant she died, passed out into the universe. And she was where she wanted to be,... I mean when she died. Drummaur tarn,... have you seen it?"

"Lord no. I'm not much of an outdoor man. It sounds very wild, very cold,... a horrible, lonely place to die."

"No. If you could see it, see how beautiful it is, how peaceful a place, I think you'd feel better."

I looked up at the hills, at the distant bowl of Fairfield, its massive bulk rising clear five miles away, above the blue lake. "When you look at hills like that, Mr Lamarr, what do you feel?"

He turned casually to absorb the vista. "It's very pretty of course. I'd rather have that as a backdrop for my work than the squalor of a city,... but I'm not sure it makes me feel anything very deeply, Mr Rowan."

"When I look at them, I feel a stirring in my bones. I always have. It's an emotion I can't explain without resorting to a lot of strange language, and that's quite vexing for a man who once prided himself on a strictly rational approach to life. But there it is, Mr. Lamarr. These feelings are real and powerful, and Beatrice is one of only two people I've ever been with who understood that side of me. In fact, Beatrice was the embodiment of what I felt. When I've thought of her over the years, the memories have aroused in me the same emotion I'm feeling now when I look at those hills,... in simple terms it's reverence and a respect for something elemental in nature, but also something I accept is completely unknowable."

Lamarr smiled in apology. "I'm not much of a spiritual man I'm afraid. I must say, I do prefer the tangible facts of my profession, a clear list of thou-shalts and thou-shalt-nots. Without such a framework, I'd be quite lost. Quite lost, Mr Rowan. But I do appreciate what you're saying."

When I had met Lamarr that morning, I had not formed an altogether sympathetic view of him. In short, I'd thought him pompous, vain, and rather shallow, but now as I looked at him in the mellowing light of that summer's

afternoon, I felt a growing admiration. He had stuck doggedly to the ordinance of his profession, as I had once stuck to the logic of my own. He desired nothing more, and seemed quite content, while all I had learned over the years was that once we abandoned the probing narrowness of fact, we risked becoming lost in the noise of cosmic oblivion.

And I had been lost for so long now.

When logic fails, one has no other recourse but to fall back upon the natural currents of life, for they do exist. But in order to locate and then navigate such currents we are required to adopt a certain unstructured frame of mind, and one of the earliest, and hardest lessons we must learn is that they rarely lead us in a direction of our own choosing.

## Chapter 5

## The Footprints of Fate

If it's true we have free will, then it ought to be possible to avoid the troublesome connections that seem bent on sucking us back into the stream of life. You might think it should be possible to steer your own path even into oblivion if you choose, without the interference of a nannying fate. Perhaps it's true, and it *is* possible in most instances, that we are none of us, as individuals, entirely indispensable to the will of the Cosmos, and we might cheerfully go our way without it interfering much in our lives. But sometimes the connections are just too strong, and then by our continued reluctance, we are only dictating the time and place of our fated encounter. We fool ourselves that we have control, but sometimes we cannot help becoming entangled in the web of a greater design.

And so, I found myself staying at the Ash Tree that night, with the intentions of visiting Drummaur Tarn in the morning. I had no other intentions but to stand by the tarn, in the place she had died, and whisper a few words of love, in parting and in sorrow. But then with fate, it's footprints are usually only revealed in retrospect, in looking back over the long years, over one's shoulder, so to speak, and then we smile that we could have been so naive not to have seen it coming.

It was evening now and I was sitting once more on the terrace, overlooking the lake, meditating on my conversation with Lamarr and on the novelty of finding myself a suspected terrorist. I remember hoping the organs of state would leave things as they were, that they would search my bank accounts, and my computer records, then conclude I was harmless. But I could not help speculating on what picture would they form of me, those faceless technocrats who policed this illusion of the world.

Certainly there was nothing obvious to suggest I was a danger to life and limb, no police record, and only small change in my bank account. To be true at that time I might have been summarised as a grey, tweed Englishman working in a grey tweed little job. Or did that make me a so-called "clean-skin", and therefore the most deadly of terror weapons? Is there any definition in the state's lexicon that might translate as a safe, normal citizen in these troubling times? What activity might constitute suspicious behaviour? A coded love letter? My liking for moleskin waistcoats, country tweeds and other assorted anachronisms? How about my preference for a hundred year old pocket-watch that kept time to no better than a minute a day, when I could have purchased accuracy of a minute a decade for less than a fiver?

Were such eccentricities a permissible defence any more?

By now the tables had been decorated for dinner with pretty blue cloths, white napkins folded like fans and stubby little candles, their flames dancing like fireflies in the dusky light. The sky was deepening and the surface of the lake was inky black now, dotted here and there with the bright sails of boats slicing

out long silver trails. The terrace was quiet, just an elderly couple, and me, the hush of evening and the warm amber air lending to everything a calm melancholy.

I had ordered and was waiting at my table, idly folding and unfolding my napkin, unable to quite rid myself of the stale, sickly odour of Detective Inspector Planer. He was not the connection I was hiding from. Planer was a manifestation of the times, part of the destructive dynamic that seemed intent on breaking through into the world perhaps, but my experience of these matters was that the truly potent connections were always infinitely more subtle. They were Yin-traps, soft energies that parted as you leaned against them, drawing you in and closing behind you so you had trouble finding your way out again.

Planer had illustrated something very forcibly through his Yang-ness: I like to believe I would not have read those letters to him even had he been kicking me senseless. They were not for him, not for this world. The importance of that moment in Lamarr's office had been my denying him any compliance in matters concerning Beatrice. The importance was not in my obstructing his investigation, but in reminding myself of the primal intensity of all I had shared with that woman.

*With Beatrice!*

I closed my eyes, then gave myself up to the feeling that had been growing in my chest since seeing Cragside again. It was a sense of opening myself, of inviting whatever it was to come inside of me - in more traditional parlance I suppose you might have called it a prayer, a request for guidance, for a sign.

The Cosmos, the Unknown, whatever you call it, and I, had yet to reach an understanding over the business of my son, Aaron, but beyond that I admitted defeat, and permitted the coupling of my fate once more to Its apparent quest for knowledge of Itself through the experience of my humble life.

A woman appeared on the terrace and was shown to a table in direct view of my own, some twenty feet away. It came to me that I had seen her somewhere before. This was the yin energy, drawing the yang of my interest - and so I reasonably assumed this was the connection I had asked for, though why my path was always indicated by women, I had yet to fathom. She was wearing a plain black dress, rather formal I thought, in these days of dressing down, and on closer scrutiny I realised her lips were set in a most unlikely frown. Indeed for all her first impression yin-ness, this woman crackled with a shield of tightly restrained Yang. In the end it was her lips that betrayed her identity: it was the policewoman who had accompanied the theatrically thuggish Detective Inspector Planer to Lamarr's office.

I felt my guts tighten - a queer mixture of fear and anger. Lamarr must have told her where I'd be - clearly not the most trustworthy of solicitors, for one could never tell whose side he was on! I waited some minutes, simply watching her, but she appeared not to know I was there, which was

preposterous, the place being so quiet. Either I was mistaken or the Unknown had developed a wry sense of humour during the years of our estrangement.

Taking a leaf out of Lamarr's book, I decided to feign a bout of blundering indignation and took it upon myself to challenge her, there and then. She looked frosty when I drew out the chair opposite her, her dark brows knitting together in a very threatening way.

"Can I help you?" Her accent was softly Scottish, but there was little softness in her expression as her eyes widened into a dangerous glare. Curious, I thought, and rather like a Venus fly trap, the soft yin voice, and the yang daggers of her eyes!

"This is ridiculous," I said. "I'm staying here for one night. I'm walking up to Drummaur Tarn in the morning, and then I'm going home,... but I suppose Lamarr's told you this already."

She seemed not to understand. "Excuse me, but do I know you?"

"Can't we just be straight with one another?"

At last, it dawned. "Mr Rowan." She shook her head. "Did you think you were under surveillance?" The scowl relaxed into neutral, but there was no apology. It seemed now she merely pitied my stupidity. "I'm off duty," she said. "It's Friday night,... this is my one treat of the whole week in this God forsaken part of the world. And now you're spoiling it."

I found myself apologising: "I'm,... I'm sorry,... it seemed too much of a coincidence." And in my world, I thought, coincidences were the calling cards of a manoeuvring fate.

"Do you think if you were under surveillance they'd send me?" she explained. "Listen, Mr Rowan, if you were being watched by the likes of Planer's people, believe me, you'd never know."

"Yes,.. of course. You're probably right. Look, once again, I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"No matter. You might as well sit down," she said. "I'll not have you sulking at me from over there."

"No,... no. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"It's up to you. Go or stay. Both our evenings are ruined either way."

"Ruined?"

"Certainly, unless one of us leaves,... and since we've both ordered neither of us are likely to do that, are we?" She gestured impatiently to the chair. "For pity's sake, sit!"

Obediently, I sat. "Look, about those letters,..."

"It's nothing to do with me."

"I just didn't want you thinking I'm always so uncooperative,..."

"As I said, it's nothing to do with me."

"I would have been embarrassed,... that's all. It sounds a bit weak, I know."

"Mr Rowan,... are you deaf? I really don't care."

Her face registered nothing - lips set, eyes impassive. I looked away feeling awkward, feeling unable to walk away and yet also unable to relate to her on any level. All the people I knew, and whom I got on with, spoke in softer tones. There was a politeness about us, a gentility that is perhaps considered peculiar in these highly charged and overbearingly rude times. It was oversensitive of me I suppose, but I could not abide being spoken to like that.

"I believe you." I said, anticipating, even as I spoke, what her reply might be, and I was correct:

"I don't care if you believe me or not, Mr Rowan!"

Hard, but brittle, I thought. This woman's shape was attractive, and her dress was well made, showing off her slender waist, her shapely bottom and her perky bosoms, but it was entirely a deception. Underneath her skin this woman was made of iron.

She was a man in disguise!

By now the sun had crowned the distant ring of Fairfield with orange flame. The fell tops would be so still, I thought, not a blade of grass stirring, a magical light over the high land, and with the valleys lost in velvet shadow: magical,... inexplicable,... feelings of elation conjured up by nothing more than shadows and light! I would have given anything to be up there at that moment.

I looked at her again, closely this time - her eyes, her mouth, her nose and I tried to find some redeeming feature, a chink in the armour, but all I could read was that same unbearable hardness.

"You've come into some property then." she said.

"It seems so," I replied, leaping into the opening she appeared to create - straight into the trap of her cynicism.

"You'll be selling it for redevelopment, then."

"Actually, I'm going to live there."

She gave a look of disbelief, followed quickly by one of contempt: "That old place?"

She would be a difficult woman to satisfy, I thought - an argument at every turn and a pathological aversion to any display of pleasure - rather like Emily, my wife, in that respect. There was no wedding ring, I noted, which was perhaps understandable.

"It's really quite a sturdy place," I said. "It's just a little old fashioned. Do you know it?"

"I've been there. There was an investigation, you understand? Before the inquest."

"Is that how you met Lamarr?"

"The solicitor? Yes,..."

"And did you also know Mrs. Fleetwood?"

"No,... I'd just been posted here when,.. when she was found. But I don't think we should be discussing any of this, now."

"You're off duty, I'm sorry."

"Did you say you'll be up at the tarn tomorrow?"

"Yes, I will."

"Any reason?"

"None I can explain."

No, she wasn't off duty, I thought, more reluctant to answer my questions, when she had so many of her own.

"You mean to the likes of me?"

"I mean I really can't explain it, even to myself. I'd just like to see the tarn again. I understand it was where she was found. I want to be where she was when she died. It was also the last place I remember seeing her."

"And when was that?"

"Ten years ago."

For a moment the hardness widened into an expression of astonishment. "You haven't seen her since then? Yet she leaves you her house?"

"Our relationship was unusual."

"Aye,... I'll grant you that - I mean - it must have been."

"So, I'm going up to the tarn, to say goodbye, I suppose."

"Well, that's up to you, but I'm not sure you want to be going up to the tarn on your own."

"Oh?"

"It's a bit rough up there, you know? I wouldn't want you getting lost. The mountain rescue teams are hard enough pressed as it is these days. The bloody tourists don't restrict themselves to blocking up the roads now, you know? "

"I know the hills quite well. I'm sure I'll manage."

"You don't look the type, Mr Rowan. I reckon a stiff wind would blow you

away."

"Then appearances are deceptive. There was something,..."

"What?"

"The way she died. Lamarr filled me in on the circumstances but I had the feeling he wasn't telling me everything."

"Perhaps to spare your feelings, Mr Rowan."

"How do you mean?"

"Did he tell you she was found naked?"

"No, he didn't mention that."

"Aye, well - a bit prudish is our Mr Lamarr. But those are the facts. And there was something else: she appeared to have simply laid down in the heather, arranged herself as if for sleep,... and then died - of natural causes I should add, so none of this should be of any interest to me, but it's strange all the same. At first it looked like a rape or an abduction,... you know? But there were no signs of anyone else having been involved - and her look of,... well,... utter repose tended to suggest she was never in any distress.

"She'd left a trail of bare footprints leading up from the house. She'd made her own way, and there was no interference with her remains. She'd been lying there only a few days before she was found."

"But the tarn's miles from the house; her feet must have been,..."

"Yes, in quite a poor state."

"Oh,... Lord,.. poor Beatrice. Was there a time of death?"

"What do you mean, time?"

"Day or night? It's not an idle question."

"The pathologist's report suggests it was during the night."

"It wasn't like her to sleep naked - for one thing the house was too cold, even in the summer."

"We found her night clothes snagged on the branches of tree, by the house."

"Like she'd become tangled up in the branches and pulled her night clothes off to set herself free?"

She seemed mildly amused by the idea. "Possibly," she said. "You have a theory?"

"It can be explained,... yes. But anyway, I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"It seems we've talked about little else since you sat down."

I could have told her, I thought, but her continuing sourness was not

encouraging. It would have meant exposing more of Beatrice, something intimate, something private. And Beatrice had not existed for her; indeed the pattern of imaginative energy that had been Beatrice had passed into oblivion when she'd laid down at Drummaur Tarn. As for Amanda Fleetwood, she had not been a person either, just a piece of meat, void of personality, of feeling. Let her wonder then! I pictured Beatrice, her lovely soft, round nudity, laid out in the heather, apparently sleeping. Unconsciously, I lowered my head into my hands and whispered her name. It was an involuntary reaction, the kind of thing to which I'm prone when suddenly overwhelmed by a memory or an image that disturbs my calm. I was embarrassed to have done it in front of her.

"I gather Mrs. Fleetwood was very fond of dressing up,... is that the name you knew her by, then? Beatrice?"

I flared defensively at the tone. "It was harmless."

"Odd though,..."

"Who's to say what's odd and what's normal? We're all odd. Some of us are just more open about it than others. I dare say even you have private thoughts you'd never share with anyone for fear of being labelled odd."

"You don't like me very much, do you, Mr Rowan?"

"I can't imagine anyone actually liking you, constable. And if I may say so, you seem to be trying very hard not to like me."

"On the contrary, I'm not trying at all."

I was shaken by this relentlessly abrasive manner, and what was worse, I fancied behind that unyielding exterior, she was actually enjoying herself, needling and baiting me, seeing how far she could push me before I threw down my napkin and walked away. It was her job, I thought,... dealing with the most odious people. She was probably like this with everyone; there was nothing in particular about me that she disliked - she was quite impartial in her contempt for the entire human race.

"So," I said. "Which big city did you work in before you were posted here?"

There was just the tiniest flicker in her eyes, and I could tell I'd scored a direct hit. She closed herself off quickly, drawing down the visor and swinging at me with her baton.

"Glasgow," she replied. "Fifteen years. The full spectrum of human depravity. Are you trying to analyse me, Mr Rowan?"

"I'm merely making conversation."

"Then talk about the weather,... tell me how nice my dress looks, but steer away from where I think you're heading."

"That makes two subjects we should each steer clear of then."

She looked down, scowling hard at the table top, as if to make the varnish craze. "I was wrong," she said. "I think you'd better go back to your own table."

"Okay, I'm sorry, but you must understand my sensitivity. People might have thought Amanda Fleetwood strange, or eccentric,... some of the locals even thought her an object of fun,... but she just had a different way of dealing with her life than the rest of us."

She looked up, her expression suddenly neutral. "It's me that should be apologising. Please ignore me, Mr Rowan,... I'm not fit for human company these days."

Silence,... awkwardness, my eyes drawn over the curve of her bosom, the impressions of lace underneath. At last, a hint of her yin-ness! Secret and dark,... and isolated by something, an old pain perhaps. She was lonely, I thought. A lonely rock in a bitter sea, her psyche utterly destroyed by all that was negative in life,... and she was hurting, almost visibly bleeding in that one brief moment of unguardedness. She was what? Late thirties? And utterly destroyed, locked in a negative spiral from which there was no escape, unless she asked for help. And a strong ego is strictly averse to asking for help. Ego would rather she died in miserable loneliness, than sought her happiness another way.

"It *is* a very pretty dress," I said.

"What? Are you chatting me up, now?"

"No, I'm sure I'm far too fragile a creature to last long in your company. You said yourself, a stiff wind would blow me away."

"Some men like a stern woman."

"Domination isn't among my list of fetishes, I'm afraid. I can't bear even to be shouted at."

"I could wear my uniform. Ah,... now I have the measure of you!"

I felt myself blushing. Humour? Was that another hint of something warm, something human?

"Truly," she said, though still rather stiff. "I am sorry, Mr Rowan."

"My name is Matthew,... please call me Matthew."

"And my name is Ellen McBride. You may call me Ms. McBride, unless I am in uniform, when you may call me Constable. What? What does that expression mean Mr Rowan?"

Was I drunk? Two subtle yin-traps had led me in, and now the curtain had closed. There was no doubt in my mind this was a significant encounter, and that I should approach it to the letter of all the rules that applied on such auspicious occasions.

"To be frank," I said, "It means I was not expecting it to be you. Put simply: you frighten me to death,... and you seem the least suited to this kind of thing, but it does appear in some way or other as if you are the one whose personal dynamic has been chosen to react with my own in this business."

Perhaps it was the sincerity of my tone that caused her to delay her riposte. "That's an imaginative line, though I have to say I understood none of it, plus I really don't fancy you that much."

"You don't know how relieved I am to hear that, Ms. McBride."

By now the serving staff had become a little confused, and a shy young waitress approached to ask if I wanted the place setting for my meal. Ms. McBride answered for me, saying that no, Mr Rowan would be returning to his own table. I was slow in responding, still churning the situation over in my mind but eventually I rose, somewhat shaken and returned to my table. It was most intriguing! The woman was a scorpion, her every word a deadly sting to my admittedly oversensitive constitution.

I appeared to have been rejected, dismissed from her table, but I went with the uncomfortable feeling I would be meeting her again, soon. It was maddening! What the hell was I supposed to do with her?

## Chapter 6

## The Book of Changes

The path to what the more spiritually inclined might call enlightenment, does not run in a straight line. This is unfortunate because we cannot help imagining the passage of our lives in a linear way. That's why we're always trying to measure how far we've travelled in units that are entirely meaningless. And so, even after long years of searching, we can sometimes feel ourselves to be no nearer an understanding of things than when we first set out along the way. We begin to doubt the validity, or even the sanity of our thoughts, and we sink into a stagnant swamp of cynicism and despair.

In fact the path to what we seek is more of a circle, an orbit around a mysterious core. With each orbit we alternate from light to dark, from doubt to certainty, from the calm belief there is a purpose to our lives, to the feeling there is none - yet with each full circle we cannot help but succeed in fixing our orbit a little nearer to the centre of things. Of course this is of no comfort to a linear mind with no knowledge of circles, and any talk of progress remains therefore quite pointless. But what this means in practical terms is that it's never wrong to doubt your purpose, never wrong to question your faith in something that is by its very nature unknowable. The sooner we admit we've lost our way, the sooner we begin finding it again because no matter how wilful or how angry we become, we are always drawn back - each time a little less egotistical, a little happier to settle for a less than complete understanding of things. We come back older, and wiser, if only in the knowledge that everything we have ever learned amounts to very little in the end.

I came down to Drummaur Tarn that morning with bright clouds scudding across summer-blue, their shadows sending dappled shades racing over the bare green flanks of the Far Eastern Fells. It was ten years since I had first encountered Beatrice there and begun the long chapter of my life that still seemed to be unfolding. A fresh breeze moved the surface of the water and turned it into hues of indigo and silver. It reflected the mood of the day - brightness and briskness, a loose, free energy that soared over the fells and swooped to run its playful, electric fingers through the tall grasses and the reeds. All was giddy and delirious, searching, seeking the potential for creation, for the potential to thrust a vital spark into anything that was receptive to its wishes.

There was nothing to indicate the final resting place of Amanda Fleetwood, but none of that really mattered, and it was by the sentinel stone, the upright boulder upon which she had been sitting, that first amber evening so long ago that I laid a small lavender cutting. I cupped my hands, and breathed in the scent that lingered, the scent of her, a scent that triggered a stream of memories. Amanda!.... such a lonely host, and to the world no more than a burnt-out business woman tipped the dark side of a nervous breakdown. Strange then that in all our correspondence I had not detected even the

slightest trace of these things, the slightest trace of Amanda.

By any rational analysis, had the facts been known, she might have been dismissed as a schizophrenic, with her distorted view of reality and her withdrawal from all social contact. But by that measure, I too was schizophrenic, still am, and growing more-so as time passes. She was plagued also, the dry old psychiatrist would have said, by a multiple personality disorder - but I knew there had always been more to it than that. With multiple personality one character does not know the existence of the others, and such was not the case with Beatrice and Amanda. They had known each other very well. Indeed, in all that Beatrice was to become, Amanda had been a perfectly willing accomplice. Amanda had merely erased the part of herself that had given her no pleasure and instead given herself over to the creation of something quite extraordinary, lending her flesh and the pattern of her mind to the energy that stalked this place, an energy that sought a permanent understanding of something, through this land and the sentient beings that moved upon it. It was Amanda who had received that energy and granted form to the one I knew as Beatrice.

How then, could Beatrice be dead?

There would be no more darkly erotic verse, no more intimate exchanges, no more nature news from the Far Eastern Fells of 1901, yet though I came down to the water's edge that morning and wept at the emptiness left by her passing, I felt also an uncanny presence, as if she might still be around, in the air, and the light, and the sound of water as it lapped upon the shore of the tarn. I fancied I could feel her embrace in the gentle breath of the wind, and the heat of her body in the sun's rays upon my cheek,...

But did I really believe in this sort of thing any more? Once, many years ago, when I had first touched that place in my mind that a part of me had sworn was certain evidence of a divine infinity, another part of me had immediately sown doubt, telling me there was no such thing and all I'd felt was an orgasm brought on by a trick of biology, and a highly skilled sexual partner. The latter voice had held sway for a long time, but things were changing now: I was crawling back.

It was twenty years since I'd first passed by that tarn, an energetic young man gripped by the desire to prove he could make it to the summit of Drummaur Fell. The me that was then had barely noticed this quiet place, let alone considered breaking his stride in order to pass an hour by its shore. In the intervening decades I must have climbed Drummaur Fell a dozen times, and the me that was myself now could no longer understand what all the fuss had been about. I had felt nothing of this place then. Indeed in those days the land and the elements swirling over it were all things to be battled against, things in the way of the goals I'd set myself. I don't know what had finally urged me to sit down one murky day three thousand feet up a black mountain in order to simply feel the mist upon my face, feel the land moving around me, feel myself upon it and in it and over it and bound to every part of it,... feel things

I could not see nor even begin to explain.

That had been the first subtle break in the path of my awareness, and the first step in the eventual finding of my way to Ghita,...

So I had moved on, and it pleased me to discover the years of my estrangement had not returned me to those remoter, colder orbits. I'd held my position to the time five years ago when Aaron had been taken, and my love for him transformed into the pain of something lost.

A shadow crossed the fells, then as if in sympathy, and plunged the tarn into a fit of moody introspection. I plunged with it, remembering all the bitterness of that time - remembering also the breaking of the way from Ghita and all those other gentle souls with whom I'd sought the centre of things. Ghita had held my face so tenderly that day, and kissed my forehead, the kiss of a mother for her child. That was also the day she'd given me her copy of The Changes.

"If I can no longer be your guide," she'd said,... "I will at least always be your friend. And if you should ever want to find your way again, The Changes will guide you."

Then, from her wrist, she had slipped the bangle of sixteen mysteriously coloured beads by which she was accustomed to consulting it - the tokens, she'd said, to remember her by.

The Changes were a precious gift, a rare translation of the I Ching. I had always feared this ancient tome, feared it for its plain speaking, echoing inescapably as it did from somewhere inside one's own skull. And I feared it, because even at those times when I no longer believed in it, I could never fault the apparent measure of its understanding. Ghita had known all of this of course, so there had been both mischief and wisdom in her actions.

I took the book from the soft, cloth wrapping I always kept it in, then laid it on the ground between my knees and stared at it for a while, at Ghita's name hand-written on the inside. I saw her hand forming the letters, long fingers, amber-brown and small pink nails, like a child's, the flow of them, the harmony in their graceful sweep, for even in so mundane a task as writing Ghita maintained an air of meditation and exquisite poise.

For those not familiar with it, The Changes is a lexicon for the intelligence underpinning the cosmic dance, the process of creation and destruction. For those who believe in it, it is a diagnostic device, a geometrical code-book for deciphering the flavour of the present moment - and in so doing, it reveals our place in the scheme of things, reveals the best way forward given the prevailing conditions - whether we like it or not; whether we believe in it or not.

As for me that morning, I no longer believed in it, my mind having swung back to the rational long ago, but The Changes was a tolerant and non-judgemental tome, and asked only that you suspended judgement, suspended ego, and were prepared to listen.

"What should I do?" I asked, then used the coloured tokens of Ghita's bangle to generate the changes:

*Divining the Way*, came the reply, *lines three and five. How do we recognise truth from delusion? Right now we are unlikely to know without gaining a higher perspective, because in our present state of mind truth and delusion are indistinguishable. We might seek our way, but lack the tranquillity to do so reliably, therefore we cannot help but stumble and fall. Wrestling for a solution will not help us now. We must take time to gather our wits. Then, when we are not looking for it, the way will reveal itself.*

I felt a shudder in my gut and the shearing of something in my mind as the wall I'd build came crashing down. The damned book had score a direct hit - a cannon ball shattering the flimsy facade of my self importance.

It was true, I had grown egotistical during the period of my estrangement. It was inevitable, I suppose, for without a knowledge of anything better, that's how we tend to get by, believing we must always struggle for control over every situation. It was hard to see my way, hard to make plans and act them out, but without a clear view, how can there be any reliable plan? I would not understand things, The Changes reminded me, without first renewing my contract with the Unknown.

I rolled the beads in my palm, thinking to ask again, to test my understanding with a slightly rephrased question, but there was no need. I understood well enough what had to be done. The book was sending me back to Ghita.

I took the watch from my pocket then and gave the crown a contemplative wind, its ratchet seeming of a sudden impossibly loud above the lapping waters of the tarn. Then from the corner of my eye, I saw her coming, tall and slow, sweeping with footless steps across the fell. She was like a shadow at first, something half glimpsed, and I expected her not to be real at all, just a flicker of something in my mind. Yet the pattern of her movements persisted, materialising into a shape that caused me to freeze.

I have never felt such fear! It was the fear of a child finding himself thrown into an adult game whose rules are unknown to him and the forfeit of which is one's sanity. I watched her, my mouth gaping, unable even to draw breath, for there was no air in this strange dream. She moved with an upright elegance, and as she drew nearer, I willed her to turn around and go back, because I was not ready, not old enough, not wise enough to feel my way through this. Its was too much, and required a decision of momentous importance.

When she realised I was there, she drew up short and met my gaze. She did not flinch, but looked as if she'd fallen into a dream. She shook her head a little and drew her jacket together. Then she breathed the name, the name of her lover, and repeated it, louder and louder as her expectation rose: "Joshua?..... Joshua?...." When I did not speak, she drew closer still. "Joshua, is it you?"

Still, I could not answer, yet who else was Joshua but me?

She was not a ghost, not exactly - I had felt the firmness of her flesh when she'd bowled me aside, along with Lamarr. She wore the same clothes as then, but they were not unkempt. Indeed there was a freshness about them: the tweed was clean, the white cotton of the blouse was pressed and radiant in the morning light.

I could not do this! It was too much to ask of me, for though she had stayed the same, I had aged a decade in this game and no longer understood its rules.

Her name was on my lips before I could think to stop myself: "Beatrice?"

Her eyes opened wide at the sound of her name: "Joshua? It *is* you! What's wrong my love?" She looked afraid, then held out her hand, imploringly. "Come home to me. It's lonely on my own."

Slowly then, I rose and began to back away.

"Joshua? What is it? Don't you know me? You spoke my name. How then do you know me?"

"Be brave," I said. "I *will* come back to you." Then I turned and walked away as briskly as I could, my heart pounding, legs shaking, and the sound of her voice calling after me:

"Joshua?.... Joshua?...."

* * * * *

# Book 2

## The book of times past

***I desire no future that will break the ties with the past***

***George Eliot***

***Author 1819-1880***

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## Chapter 7

## Towards the Beginning of Things

We must turn back now, back more towards the beginning of things, for stories are clumsy conveyances and come with the artificial boundaries of their beginnings and their endings, even though in the true perception of reality, such things have no real meaning.

It is apparent somewhere deep inside of me that I have always known Beatrice, felt her presence in my bones since a place before time. Time, like beginnings and endings, is a strictly human concept, a linear measure that lends itself to the illusion of things, that we are born, grow old, then die, and that all matter tends to disperse. But there are places we can visit that are out of time, places where the experience of our lives can be perceived as a continuous whole. Dreams are like that. They make perfect sense as we swim their upside down and back to frontness, yet on waking, on plunging back into time, both the memories of the dream and our perceptions of them are lost through their violent rejection by our more rational, waking senses. Dreams can also convey the peculiar certainty that you have dreamed a dream before, even though your waking reality and the evidence of a dream diary, if such there be, will deny all of this and tell you it's the first time.

So it was with Beatrice.

We must go back ten years, to the time when I found myself travelling to the Lakes one Friday evening. I had packed a tent and was looking forward to spending a few nights under canvas, alone. It was a much needed release from the tangled web my life had become, a rare chance to slip the noose of a disastrous marriage, take refuge in the days of youth, the days of innocence, and freedom, and to search out that certain lightness of being we are not aware of ever possessing until we have lost it for ever.

I was barely an hour into that journey when I began to doubt my purpose. There was a feeling of sluggishness, the motorway never quite clearing of traffic, a sense of being confined at a pace of someone else's choosing - three lanes of vehicles glinting in the spring sunshine, vehicles whose roof-racks bulged with suitcases, and whose engines strained against the bulbous insults of the caravans and the little boats they towed. It dawned slowly: the time I had chosen to make this escape had coincided with one of the worst of the annual migrations the English inflict upon themselves: it was the Spring Bank Holiday!

I swore and thumped the wheel in a sudden fit of self-chastisement, for in those days I had not even begun to rid myself of a belief in the universal malevolence of fate, nor my own loathsome stupidity. Of all the times I could have gone, I had to pick that one terrible weekend! As I saw it, there was nothing to be done now but crawl to the next exit and turn tail for home. I would have done it too,... the me that was no longer the me I was on the way to becoming, the me that Ghita had rescued from her Yoga class in that musty

old Church Hall: a lone male just turned thirty and painfully self conscious among a dozen Lycra clad old ladies, all learning simply to bend and stretch, while he'd gone thinking to pierce his soul and make it bleed.

"See you next week then, Matthew," she'd said, coming to me afterwards as the echoing hall had emptied. And there was I, surprised she'd even remembered my name. I was also embarrassed by her extraordinary beauty and unable to do more than mumble through my blushes as she gazed at me strangely: "Next week. Yes, of course."

Then had come that slow shake of the head and the look of perfect understanding, perfect calm, her large eyes filled as always with such hypnotic sweetness: "You're very polite," she'd said. "But I think we both know you won't be coming again." Then she had touched her delicate fingers to my forehead. It was an odd gesture, personal, intrusive even, but carried out with the calm professionalism of a doctor. I'd caught the scent of Jasmine and Sandalwood, a scent that was later to become forever associated with candlelight, and flickering shadows, and soft silks; the scent of Ghita.

"I see the mark," she'd said. "I know you're lost." Then she'd given me her card. "Come and see me privately."

So, yes, I might have turned around, defeated and cursing my luck, but the me that had emerged even from my first hours alone with Ghita understood enough to gently chide himself for his tantrum, then continue on his way.

It was the Bank Holiday weekend. So what? There was a purpose still worth exploring.

The traffic remained discouragingly heavy, even as far as Lancaster, the vehicles bunching nose to tail as I brought that old Volkswagen up the long rise by the University. The weather was good, the air uncommonly clear and on the long flat stretch overlooking Morecambe Bay, I spied the mountains for the first time that year. They looked so tranquil, even though I knew the little valley roads would be choked with cars and people, but there remained sufficient magic in that illusion, to draw me further in.

I had no plan, no accommodation booked in advance, for Ghita had from the very first taught me to live my life a little more on the off-chance. "Go with the moment," she would say. "The further we plan ahead, my love, the less we invite the co-operation of fate."

Thus it was I found myself running over the Blackstone pass and pulling into the Seven Sister's campsite. But I had cause to question my judgement again, when I entered the booking hut to find the queue already ten deep, the heat sweltering. It was a poky little place bursting with the paraphernalia of camping - spare guy lines, tent pegs, gas canisters, tins of baked beans and bottles of red wine - everything marked well above its recommended retail price.

I remember clearly the sleazy man behind the counter who at once put me in

mind of a predatory lizard. He didn't look very happy, which was strange, for surely I thought, all this custom should have made him more content with his lot? Indeed, all that greeted me when I finally made it to the desk was a surly half-look that did not quite meet my eyes.

"Have you a pitch?" I asked.

"You mean you haven't booked?"

"Booked? No."

Was he joking? One usually booked ahead for hotels - that was fair enough, but never a campsite. I mean wasn't that the point, even on Bank Holiday weekends? You simply turned up with your tent. It was the freedom, the informality of it. To book ahead was surely to defeat the object.

There followed much sighing and thumbing of a greasy register.

"I could squeeze you in I suppose. But I'm only taking three night bookings."

"Excuse me?"

Lizard-man gave a pained look. "Three nights. You'll have to stay for three nights," he explained.

"I only want to stay for one," I said, and the will even for that was fading now. "I was thinking of touring round a bit. I don't want to be tied to one place."

But such explanations were of no interest to the lizard-man and I felt embarrassed for admitting such pathetic utterances. They were like the whimpering of a mouse fatally caught in the cat's claws - better just to shut up and be done with it!

There was another surly look followed by an arrogant shrug. "Well you can stay one night of course, but you'll still have pay the three night rate."

There was a significant pause. These were the rules pertaining to Bank Holiday weekends, he was telling me, and I was an imbecile for not knowing them. I began to form the word "bollocks" in my head, pursing my lips in readiness, but was sensitive to the crowd pressing behind me, each person awaiting their turn to prostrate themselves, to pay homage to the Lizard-Lord of the Seven Sister's campsite.

And of course Ghita would not have approved.

"That seems somewhat greedy to me," I said, to which the man allowed a mouthful of air to pass between his pursed lips. Take it or leave it, he was saying.

I might have paid but of course it would have been wrong, even though such sharp practices were sadly the norm. Ghita followed the Christian tenets on the value of meekness, but said that according to her own philosophy, meekness ceased to be a virtue if our turning the cheek also gave rise to the egotistical inflation of another. Under those circumstances it was right to

either state one's position, or if possible, simply walk away without submitting to the dominant will.

I turned away and noted with a sideways glance how he dismissed me with a flick of his eyebrow. Then a young couple stepped up smartly to take my place, eager to explain they'd booked ahead and that three nights was no problem,... no problem at all! The lizard-man's chest swelled and I pitied them, for they looked bright and sweet, and deserved much better.

Outside, the yard was jammed with cars as more people arrived in order to begin the stressful business of enjoying their summers. Below, in the valley bottom, I could see what looked like a shanty town of canvas, more tents on the periphery in various stages of erection. There was raucous laughter, the squeal of children as they ran like herds of jolly piglets, and the air was thick with the scent of burning meat. It wasn't what I'd had in mind at all, I thought. People would be partying all night, yelping and screeching drunkenly into the small hours while what I wanted was to spend some time alone. How could my judgement have been so poor? Or was it that I had judged things correctly and was being shown all of this for a reason?

It was going up for seven o'clock now and my stomach told me I should have been heating a tin of beans over a Primus stove by now. All around, the fells rose so sharply it was a wonder the grass didn't slide off and end up piled in the valley. The tops were aglow with the golden light of early evening while the valleys were filling with velvety shadow. Meanwhile, around me, within the narrow bounds of the campsite there was chaos, the clamour of a people intent on what seemed an entirely useless purpose.

"Are you moving that thing or what?" came a voice.

I looked to find a big Japanese four by four at my elbow, a young blonde-haired and rather superior looking woman hanging out of the driver's window, gold ornaments round her neck and wrist. They were like the decorations Ghita sometimes wore when she was otherwise undressed, gold against her skin and hauntingly beautiful, but on this woman they seemed vulgar. There were three adolescent girls bouncing and sniggering in the back and I wondered if their destiny was to follow their mother's example.

"Yes. I'm moving on now."

"Hurry up, then. You're causing a traffic jam."

I looked beyond the four by four and saw there was indeed a long line of cars backed up almost to the valley road. That was my fault, she was saying. This was an intriguing concept, for it seemed she carried a very clear vision of her own reality, a reality in which she formed the centre of things, and where everyone else got in her way.

I did not smile at this woman as I might have done once out of misguided meekness. "You've booked for three nights I hope," I said.

"What's that to do with you? Come on, hurry up!" She slapped the side of her

vehicle as if to impress me with her urgency, at which point the clasp of her gold bracelet snapped and fell into the dust. I half expected her to look crestfallen and I began to sympathise in anticipation, moving forward to pick the bangle up for her, but her anger only deepened and she jumped out of the vehicle, recovering the thing hurriedly as if she expected me to run off with it.

Did she deal with every connection in such an impatient tone I wondered? The woman was a devil and surely she could not have had much peace in her life. A braver man might have counselled her to chill out but I feared she might have punched me to the ground.

I drove a short distance further along the valley, then parked out in the wildness, on the grass verge. There I finally heated my tin of beans and sat with my back against the dry stone wall, and gazed up at the fells. The highest of the summits thereabouts was Drummaur Fell. It stood out from its neighbours, rising more dramatically from the valley floor, like a bell, its top bearing a neat little crown of grey crags. I was reminded then of an evening scramble to its summit many years ago. There was a peaceful tarn up there too, I recalled, some way along the broad connecting ridge, overlooking the quieter uninhabited valleys to the east. This memory had come to me quite suddenly, slipping in against the current of my thoughts,...

That was it then. I did not even bother to lock my car, and when I returned to it some days later, it was also to find a tin of beans still upon the Primus stove, so completely had I been absorbed by things. I'd simply grabbed my jacket, then crossed the stile and began to climb.

I could hear the commotion of the campsite and smell the burning of sausages for a full half hour, but by degrees the sigh of the wind overcame these distractions until my awareness was dominated by the wilderness around me. The valley road and the shanty town of tents were eventually obscured and at last I felt myself borne up into the clean lap of the hills. I had not seen the top of Gannet Fell for a decade. I'd been in my twenties then, unburdened, but lacking any meaningful direction. If anything my legs seemed stronger now in my thirties, which surprised me, though I suspect it was because as I'd grown older, I'd come more to expect the hardship and so paced myself accordingly. It frightened me how those ten years could have passed so quickly, how the images I carried of that time could be so fresh and yet already so very old. It frightens me also how quickly were to pass the ten years that followed.

I did not reach the summit that day which might seem odd for I was only twenty yards away, the breathing done, the ache in my thighs beginning to ease as the little cairn came into view against the evening sky. But I was overcome by a feeling of disgust that I should have wanted to achieve it in the first place. It was insane, I thought, for there seemed no harm in it, yet I veered off like someone fearing a deadly trap, and instead found myself seeking the quiet waters of the tarn I vaguely recalled, hundreds of feet below on the broad back of the hummocky ridge.

Drummaur Tarn was still and silent and black, a black mirror like warm tar in bowl of green velvet, nestled among low crags and even from a considerable distance I could plainly see, seated pixie-like by its shore, upon a rock, there was a lone woman. I felt the air drift through me and I knew with the certainty of a premonition, that everything was fated to be this way. My journey made perfect sense now. She had always been waiting, as I had always been treading the path to be with her. We were figures finely painted in a timeless landscape, characters in a story of myth from the days when men first sat round fires and told stories.

My own part in this had begun with the tangled mess of my life, and Ghita's infectious belief that no matter how bad things seemed, no matter how dark or lost or wasted, we had only to ask and we would be granted a connection, something to lead us from that dark place into a brighter, cleaner air. It was for us then to recognise that moment when it came and perhaps more crucially, avoid making any assumptions about where the way might lead.

From the darkness I had cried out, and I had been granted my connection.

## Chapter 8

### Beatrice at the tarn of dreams

We think too much about things these days. We plan too far ahead as if playing chess against a formidable adversary, where the loser forfeits his soul. That was how I was taught to play the game in the early years of my life and in some ways it remained my second nature even then, at the strange beginning of my story. Ghita's gentle influence had only just begun to make me question such accepted wisdoms.

Had I thought ahead that evening, I might have shied away, turned tail in frustration at someone having beaten me to the lonely solitude of that lovely tarn, or been afraid she'd take my presence as an intrusion, or even a threat, but I knew enough to recognise this connection for what it was.

I came down to her slowly, glancing up now and then as I picked my way along the faint track. There was something immediately striking about her. She sat quite still, her back straight, her head upright like a queen riding side-saddle upon the sentinel stone, and she wore the oddest clothes. They were old. More than old they were antique. There was a long tweed skirt, a smart white blouse with an upright collar, a snug fitting tweed jacket, and on her head there was a straw bonnet adorned with bright blue ribbons. The costume was Edwardian or perhaps Victorian and I felt the hairs on my neck rise as the full impact of this apparition hit me.

"Are you real?" I breathed, half expecting she would turn to smoke and disappear.

I remember she focused upon me with one eyebrow slightly raised, querying, challenging, inquisitive: "What would you do if I said not?"

She sounded real enough. "I don't know. Are you telling me you're not real?"

She lowered her gaze to the waters of the tarn. "Not at the moment," she said.

"Then I'm seeing things?"

"Yes, I'm pure fantasy."

I'd stumbled upon an uncommonly strange soul, and unlike the devil-woman who had accosted me at the shanty town of tents, I sensed a rare vulnerability - a thing of wonder, a thing of great value.

"You only exist in my head?"

"Not in yours, stranger," she replied. "In mine. I am a figment of my own imagination. You don't think I'd wear these clothes to the office do you?"

I drew nearer, but no closer than an easy talking distance, then paused by the water's edge across a little bay from where she sat. I feared I was staring too intently, so incongruous she appeared and so vivid, so perfect. The hairs on the back of my neck were rising, for she could still have been a vision, a sprite.

"Would it be all right if I shared the tarn with your figment for a while?" I asked, in all reverence.

"So long as you don't mind becoming a part of it," she replied.

"A part of your figment? I don't think I'm dressed for that."

She allowed me a sliver of a smile then, a hint of approval at my playfulness. This was reassuring, for the presence of a sense of humour suggested she was not completely insane.

I lay back in the heather, enjoying the springy feel of it as I gazed up into the sky. The blue was deepening, the green and gold of the fells deepening also as evening faded into dusk.

"Why didn't you go for the top, like you intended?" she asked.

"How do you know that was what I intended?"

"Because I watched you. You were almost there, and then you turned your back on it."

"It isn't always important to get to the top of things."

"Then why bother trying in the first place?"

"Sometimes we think it's what we want. Then we find it's not"

"Most would have gone for it anyway, I mean having got so far."

"Only if they wanted to prove something to themselves, or to others."

"You're saying you've nothing to prove?"

"What would it have proved? That I could make the remaining twenty yards? I knew I could do that without needing to prove it."

"You have a point, but tell me, do you never tire of big boys who kick sand in your face?"

I laughed. "I tend not to associate with sand kickers," I replied. "They're rather a primitive breed, and not much use in a civilised society. Anyway, we miss things if we're always running around trying to prove ourselves by kicking sand, don't you think?"

"There's truth in what you say, though many would disagree."

I felt she was curious about me, about my presence - equally aware perhaps of the significance in this encounter. She looked to be in her early thirties, small of stature, rather full of figure and strangely suited to the clothes she wore. She was attractive, though not possessed of great beauty, yet in the throes of her fantasy she seemed to shine.

"What would you have missed if you'd gone for the top?" she asked.

"You for a start," I replied, daring to be a little flirtatious.

She shook her head. "You were bound to come this way. And I wasn't going

anywhere."

"We're talking about your fantasy now?"

"Of course."

"So who am I in your fantasy? Who was bound to come this way?"

"My lost love." she replied. "I've not seen you since the spring of nineteen hundred. It was on an evening like this when we last said goodbye, at this very tarn. You promised you'd return, that we'd be together again and everything would be as it was before. I've been waiting for a hundred years. Where the hell have you been, you bastard?"

I wasn't sure how to read her.

"Am I worrying you?" she asked.

"You are,... a little."

"It's just a game," she laughed. "Somewhere to hide oneself. Tell me, who might I be to you?"

I tried to think, but my mind was suddenly far from still and I could not oblige her.

"Come on," she coaxed. "Say the first thing that comes into your head."

"How about a priestess, or a fairy queen who holds court every sunset by Drummaur Tarn, someone who knows all the answers and will explain them to me if I'm patient and respectful."

She gasped with a genuine pleasure. "You play the game well, stranger. Oh, I'd love to play that part. Your Elf queen, your Galadriel." She sighed. "Though you'd be unwise to accept my counsel on anything."

I took it as the moment of melting. I smiled. "My name's,..." But she cut me off with an urgent wave of her hand, and turning her head away she said: "That would break the spell. I don't want to know your real name, and you shall not know mine."

"Then how about your lost love. Does he have a name?"

"His name is Joshua," she replied.

I looked at her as she sat upon the Sentinel stone, her figure perfectly reflected in the still waters. All was serene, but I felt a wind rattling through the shutters and lifting the floorboards. In life, Ghita had taught me, we are free to choose our own paths, but there are also certain cross-roads it's impossible for us to avoid, like the dates of meetings scattered throughout an otherwise blank diary, times pre-booked long ago, appointments we are bound to keep. This was one of them.

"In your fantasy," I said. "Do you have a name?"

She smiled and then her eyes grew large as she breathed the name across the

water: "My name is Beatrice." She laughed, a sweet laugh, amused by her own dramatics. "You think I'm mad?"

"I haven't made my mind up yet,.. not that it would matter of course."

"That's very generous of you. So, tell me stranger are you from around here?"

"No, just another tourist, I'm afraid. I drove up from Manchester."

"Some would say Manchester is local. It's what? A hundred miles?"

"Closer to a million, I'd say. Manchester's on the other side of the moon from here."

"I understand. You came to spend the weekend?"

"I came thinking to spend the weekend, yes - but I forgot it was the Spring Bank holiday."

"Is it? Ah,... yes of course - an unfortunate mistake for a seeker of solitude like you."

"What makes you think I'm a seeker of solitude?"

"Your being here alone on Drummaur Fell speaks that much. Only seekers pass this way."

"You've got me sussed then, Beatrice, though I seem to have made a beeline for your company instead of sitting on my own up there."

"That's different," she said, then glanced away. "You couldn't find anywhere to stay?"

"No. I'll be heading back tonight, it seems."

"That's a shame. I believe the weather's set to be fair."

"Then I shall mow my grass."

She eyed me thoughtfully. "Come and stay at my house," she said. "It's not far from here."

"You run a bed and breakfast?"

"No - nor do I normally invite guests, but I'm prepared to make an exception in your case. I have a spare room and you're welcome to it."

"Well, that's very generous of you, but I'll be heading back, I think."

"You're afraid to risk it?"

Of course I was afraid. It was ridiculous. We'd met only five minutes ago, exchanged so few words and it seemed premature for her to be inviting me home, no matter how certain I was of the connection between us. But what else then was there to do? How else were we to conclude the business we had begun? It was inevitable I would go with her, but a significant encounter is always dangerous and requires the most skilful handling - too little interest and the connection is broken, too much and one could be drawn into a

disastrous collision.

"You don't know me, Beatrice. How can you trust me?"

"I think we both know trust doesn't come into it," she said. "We are conscious of an underlying connection here. I'm curious about what this might mean for me, as you are curious about what it might mean for you. We can hardly sit out here all night. It'll be dark in another hour. If you're going home, stranger, you'd better make tracks, otherwise stay and we can talk some more."

"How can you know all of that? How can you feel that?"

"You feel it, don't you? Well, so do I. This is the simple truth. Why deny it?"

It *was* the truth, and simply stated, but truth requires also a certain courage. "You should know I'm married," I said. "I'm not looking for romance - or anything else."

"Neither am I. After all, this is nineteen hundred and one. People don't simply fall into bed the first chance they get, do they? You're quite safe with me. Remember, I'm still waiting for my lost love. For my beloved Joshua."

We lingered for a full hour, perversely quiet now we had all the time in the world to talk. Beatrice sat so still that once or twice I thought she'd secretly deserted me and I had to look up to check she was still there in the gathering gloom. It was not a cold evening, though the season was early and the sky was clear,... the first hint of summer's breath settling over the land. I felt I might easily have stayed until morning without discomfort. On occasion, I had slept among the fells in summer, so I was not afraid of the onset of darkness. But when the night came, it came on like a thick blanket, extinguishing the outline of the mountains and the lay of the land, so that I was lost and dared not move.

"I can't see you any more," I said.

"I'm here. Does the darkness trouble you?"

"Not the darkness - more the thought of trying to get off the fells blind."

"Then wait a while longer, and the moon will guide us."

After another half hour, I witnessed the slow and miraculous materialisation of the Eastern Fells, but they were rendered only as a vague silhouette in the blackness as a full moon rose above them, slowly gathering strength and luminosity. When it emerged the land was reborn in shades of grey and blue and silver. It set my spine tingling, for it was a beauty that did not stop at the rim of my eye, but plunged deep, awakening those parts of me Ghita had said were eternal. And I knew I had been this way before, that I had sat with this woman before and watched the moon rise over the fells, that I would sit here again with her, that the power seeking to know itself through my eyes had tied a firm knot in the energy of this moment, like a milestone or a reminder of its understanding, a simple truth to be played over and over for all eternity.

She rose then and beckoned for me to follow. She was my only guide, my fate entirely in her hands as she led me from the ridge that night. She smiled and it seemed quite natural when she slipped her hand through my arm, so that we strolled with all the mutual familiarity of lovers.

"Come, stranger," she said. "You belong to me now."

## Chapter 9

## A Place Outside of Time

We moved with ease across the fell, our way illuminated by an increasingly intense moonlight. Then we began a sharp and rocky decent into the valley I knew as Drummaurdale - but that night, it might have been a plunge into oblivion. She moved gracefully, untroubled and yet also incongruous in her costume. It lent an atmosphere of homely civilisation, of polite conversation and fine china teacups to a place I would not usually have ventured without my most serious hiking gear. How far away, I thought, the world seemed already: the shanty town of tents, where the air would still be thick with the scent of barbecues and jangling with the noise of a bank holiday weekend,... all of it was lost - my wife, my home, even Ghita were now insulated from my senses by a wedge of rock a mile wide and two thousand feet high. I did not miss it - did not miss my home at all, though I was normally prone to an irrational longing for its imagined comforts when I was away from it for any length of time. But now all I felt was the hollow sham my life had been. All that existed was this land, and Beatrice who's warm presence began to fill the void. The feel of her hand on my arm, the combined rhythm of our movement, all of it was familiar and true.

I had always known this woman.

It took hour to reach the bottom of the valley, a long walk without a pause, eventually reaching a line of trees. Here the land opened up a little into a broad valley and I guessed it eventually spilled down over rough pastures to the distant shore of Ullswater. It was there, tucked into a fold of hills, by a tumbling beck and protected by a dense ring of oak and sycamore, that she led me through a gate, down a long tunnel of overhanging leaves and into the garden of a lone house. There was no road, no visible track, no car, no tyre marks, no physical indication of how she might have got there in the first place other than walked in from another life, as I had walked in from my own.

"This is Cragside," she said, as she pushed open the door.

"You live here?"

"Just at the weekends for now. But pretty soon I intend living here all the time."

In the hallway, she paused to light an oil-lamp, within whose amber glow I caught my first sight of the capsule that was Cragside.

"There's no electricity?" I asked.

"Of course not, silly. It's 1901, remember? And before you ask, there's no gas, and no telephone either." She leaned back on the door, closing it with a thud. "Wonderful isn't it? Come through to the kitchen. Are you hungry? It's warmer in there. I never let the stove die."

She walked through, and I was bound to follow, for without her there was no

light. It was a like a sepia photograph, a living museum, a cast iron range, the smell and the murmur of burning wood behind a grille, and hanging from the maiden were herbs, tied in bunches and drying: Rosemary and Thyme, and others whose names I could not guess, but whose gentle perfumes filled the shadows of the place, made it warm and welcoming. And none of it was for show.

"Are there no services at all?" I asked. "What about water?"

"It runs down a pipe from the fells," she replied. "Mostly its reliable but sometimes in summer when the beck is low, I have to fetch it by hand in buckets - sometimes in winter as well, when the pipe freezes."

"Sounds like fun!"

"It is actually."

"You really mean that?"

"Of course. What is more real than the heat and the cold of the seasons, or the simple fact of the light and the dark? Why do we try to insulate ourselves from reality all the time?"

"So we can live longer?"

She could tell I was not really at odds with her views and she smiled. "If we lose touch with the simple turning of the earth, stranger, we risk a form of insanity worse than any untimely death."

I thought for a moment. "I understand what you mean. And truly this must be a wonderful place to escape to."

"I'm lucky to have it. We all need somewhere to escape, don't you agree? What about you? How do you escape?"

"Into my dreams I suppose." I was not sure how much of my true self this woman would permit me to reveal, nor how much she could bear. It already it seemed my name was forbidden in this secret little world and I feared that even the mention of Matthew Rowan would cause the walls to shimmer out of existence. "Though lately, " I went on. "I've been thinking perhaps there is no escape."

"You don't really believe that. You follow your dreams and fancies as much as I, or we wouldn't be together now."

That was true, I thought. "I suppose what I meant was, I sometimes question the wisdom of following our dreams."

"We all have doubts, but I suppose the test is whether our dreams make us feel better or not. What? You smile?"

"I'm sorry,... it's just that someone else has told me that recently."

"Your wife?"

"Lord no,..."

"Your lover then?"

"No,... really, my life is not that complicated,... at least not in the sense you suppose."

We sat at an old kitchen table, and I watched as she removed her bonnet by first withdrawing a long silver pin that gleamed in the honey coloured light. Then she laid the bonnet between us and allowed her hair to fall around her shoulders. It was dark brown and hung naturally in voluminous coils and curls. I caught the scent of it, breathed it in and felt myself transported to another time. It was lavender, the scent of Beatrice. She watched me, watched my expression as her hair fell and I sensed she was not displeased by it.

"So," she said. "You're lost to the world tonight - no one knows where you are - only me."

"It seems so. And you? Who else knows you're here?"

"No one. We are both lost." She looked at me for a while, toying with a small silver fob-watch that hung around her neck. She checked it, then glanced over her shoulder to the grandfather clock whose soporific rhythms paced the silence of the kitchen.

"It's nearly an hour out," I said, comparing it against my own watch.

"No," she said. "It's about right. I keep my own time here." She smiled. "You're a strange man. I look into your eyes and I know that I can trust you. I see a tenderness and a vulnerability and a will to do good. I sense that even if a stranger asked you to debase yourself, you'd find a way to oblige, or in some way avoid giving offence. Please don't misunderstand - you need fear nothing from me on that score. It's just that men like you have always interested me, and I've had the opportunity to meet so few. Look, I think we understand one another. We seem both to have begun to find our bearings in life by swinging a little further to port than most people - I mean in a way that only a handful of others might recognise,... you know?"

"Go on,... I'm following you."

"Why have we been brought together, do you think?"

"It remains to be seen,..."

She drummed her fingers gently upon the table top while she summoned the courage to go on. "But you are willing,... to explore? With me?"

I gave a nod, not sure what I was agreeing to of course. I was simply carried away by the dream of her, by the dream of Cragside and Drummaur Fell. It was the right thing to do. The only thing. The moment had demanded my compliance, and there I was.

"Certainly, " I said. "I think we have no choice but to explore it. I just don't know how to begin."

She smiled, satisfied that were on the same wavelength. "Then perhaps we should simply eat, and take it from there. What do you think?"

"That sounds good. Thank you."

"Then if you'd care to wash, I'll set the table."

I took a lamp with me and followed her directions to the bathroom, which I found on the landing upstairs. The more I saw of the house, the more incredible it seemed to me that it could exist at all. There was not even one careless clue that my time and place was in the present. Everything spoke of its vintage providence, yet like the clothes she wore, all appeared to be in such good condition, everything might have been purchased only yesterday.

There was a large bath and a grand porcelain sink, both courtesy of Armitage Shanks, and likewise a robust Victorian toilet. All of it sparkled like new. Such standards of sanitation were not enjoyed by most people at the turn of the century I thought, so I assumed whatever the history of the house, it had been the home of someone well to do,... unless it was an elaborate modern fake.

I ran some water into the basin. It was not scalding hot, as I'd grown used to with a modern gas boiler, but it was sufficient. The soap was plain carbolic, and as I gazed around I saw none of the usual multitude of plastic bottles that inhabited every shelf of the other bathrooms I knew - again no clue to the present: no Boots no Body Shop, no Superdrug. It was basic, I thought, but wonderfully uncluttered and I had the feeling that even without the fundamental convenience of electricity, it would still be comfortable, living in that house.

I came down to find the table set with a neat cloth, silver cutlery and a bottle of red wine from which the label had been steamed - no clues there either, I thought.

As she made to pour me a glass, I held out my hand. "Not for me, thanks."

"You don't drink?"

"Not for a while now."

"That *is* unusual. I thought it was a universal vice." She was disappointed and I wondered if she had meant to lower my defences, to loosen my reserve with alcohol. "This means I shall have to drink the whole bottle myself," she complained. "And then you'll have to undress me and put me to bed." She regarded me coyly and smiled - a saucy threat, I thought, but not meant. She was testing me perhaps, but also pleading politely for me to join her in the lowering of both our defences.

"Just the one glass then."

In my mind's eye, I saw Ghita frown. But I shall sip it, I thought. I shall not lose myself to it.

We ate a pie. It was unusual, but only in that it was exceedingly good and every aspect of it from the finely chopped pieces of steak to the delicate little crinkles on the pastry, had been prepared in that very kitchen, then baked in that antique oven. It sounds trivial, to savour so plain a thing as a pie, but savour it I did. And as the wine dulled the sharpness of my nerves, I began to relax into a contemplative frame of mind. It would not last long, I thought, for wine had always been swift in depressing my spirit, like a well greased elevator dropping between floors, always overshooting the level at which I wanted to get off and linger.

She wore no rings but I noted there was a welt on her wedding finger. "You're married?"

She gave me a nod to indicate that she was.

"Children?"

She shook her head, then she glanced away as if to discourage further questioning.

"I'm sorry. Would you rather talk about something else?"

She sighed. "No,.. you're right to explore this. We should outline the circumstances of our lives, not that it has any bearing on what happens between us, you understand? But we need to know where each of us is coming from. I'm married, yes, but seeking separation from my husband. There's no bad feeling or anything, but we've both come to realise we were never meant to be together. He finds my fancies too unsettling, as I find his staidness too stagnating these days. Now you. I know you're married. Do you have any children?"

"A boy," I said. "But I'm not the natural father." This, coming as it did at the top of my list seemed a valuable lesson in itself, and it shocked me that I could have blurted it out so easily. "My wife had an affair," I explained. "I always knew the child wasn't mine, but I've tried to relate to him as if he were. I do love him deeply, but not my wife,... not any more. Ordinarily we wouldn't be together I suppose, but for the time being we're bound by the child. It's an unusual situation. Aaron's three now, and we'll be together until he's old enough to understand, I suppose,..."

She leaned back and thought this over for a while. "You fear the danger in that situation," she observed. "And the real father? Does he know about Aaron?"

"No. But I know the man, and there's always the possibility he could find out."

"Then you live your life under a shadow. Why did you stay with her? Most men would have left her to it."

"You mean in order to avoid having sand kicked in my face? I agree, it would have been easier to have left her. Everyone said I should - my parents, my colleagues,... even her parents said I should have left her. But it was the

child's fate to be born, and I was persuaded it was the right thing to do, to stay with my wife, to help Aaron until he's old enough to steer his own course."

"But that could be another fifteen years, tied down to a woman you must loathe!"

"Not loathe. We're friends. We get along all right."

"You say you were persuaded? You mean by someone else?"

"Yes, by a friend. Ghita,..."

"Tell me, who is Ghita?"

"Ghita is my ,... my teacher."

"You hesitate. She might be more than a teacher then? Or you hope she might!"

"She is my teacher," I said, determined not to give anything more away.

"I'm intrigued. In what sense is she your teacher?"

"In a meditative sense,... a spiritual sense."

"Ghita is your guru, then?"

"No, my friend,... and teacher."

Beatrice nodded as if she had viewed the outline of my life and reached an understanding that had thus far eluded me. She gave a long sigh and shook her head in bewilderment. "I'm too worldly. If I'd met you at the time, I would have told you to dump the bitch. Then I would have taken you as my lover and have done with it. But Ghita? I can see she was right to advise you the way she did - and she clearly has no designs on you herself or she would have advised you differently. Yet the price you pay! You could lose this child any moment. Your wife has only to meet someone,... and you can hardly feel you trust her to be faithful any more."

"Love isn't about possession. I'll never be his natural father, never possess him in that curiously modern sense where everything is defined by ownership, but I will always love him."

"The love you describe is about being together. That kind of love is warm and settling. Love torn apart bleeds, and it hurts like hell." Beatrice retreated into silence for a while, frowning at the seriousness of her thoughts. "Why are you here? Why are you still alone? Why are you following strange women to their homes and letting them feed you, when you have your adopted son and your wife and,... Ghita? Is it sex you want? I will gladly give it, but I'd thought perhaps there was something more."

"I told you I'm not looking for anything like that."

"Do you sleep with your wife?"

"Not any more."

"Then Ghita is your a lover."

"I told you , I have no lover." The tension was too much. I laughed and swallowed the last of my wine in one long gulp. "I repeat: Ghita is not my lover, and no, I do not sleep with my wife."

She frowned. "It must be very frustrating."

"Sex is something very different for me these days. I don't mind it that my wife no longer desires me."

"You mean you masturbate a lot? What? I'm serious. You're still young. How can you stand it. It's not natural!"

"There's nothing natural about the English approach to sex. Whether it's nineteen hundred and one, or two thousand and ten, we're always going to think of it as something dirty or at best functional, a thing to be got over somehow with as few blushes as possible."

She gave me a wistful look. "What you say is true. You describe my husband's views on it perfectly. Well either that or he's never really found me that desirable." She laughed. "He recently joked that I have the figure of a Toby jug and the all the sexual allure of a sack of potatoes."

"Your husband was unkind, if he really said those things. But you know sex has nothing to do with shape, as lovely as yours appears to be. Even at its most basic, it's about the granting of mutual pleasure, not the taking of anything. We speak of a man taking a woman, as if he's actually stealing her, or denying her of something. Denying her of what exactly? Liberty? Status? Dignity?"

"Careful how you speak Joshua, you'll have me swooning with desire. Dare I ask what it means for sex not to be taken at its most basic, but to be enjoyed to its fullest?..."

I hesitated to go on, for already the atmosphere in the old house was changing, becoming charged and focused in an erotic way that I had not intended, but she waited expectantly, intent on my answer:

She looked puzzled. "What?... you think you might shock me? Go on. I'm intrigued."

"In some traditions, sexual union is used as a means of reaching a state of spiritual awareness,... a glimpse of the divine nature of reality."

"You mean Tantric sex? Well, of course!" She looked at me, and then it dawned. "This is what Ghita teaches you? Joshua, my God! Oh, my dear. My God. *My God*!"

She seemed genuinely shaken, so I moved to reassure her. "That is not the only thing Ghita has taught me. It isn't everything, you know. To those more skilled perhaps, .... but to a boring old Englishman,..."

"You do this with Ghita?"

"Not very often now, to begin with, yes. But these days it's mostly with other's like me,... other students."

"And your wife knows?"

"Heavens no. She'd chuck me out."

Beatrice wrinkled her nose in contempt. "Does it not bother you how much this woman uses you? I take it you earn the money and pay all the bills and are expected to be the perfect father to a child that isn't yours. And yet you have to tiptoe around her, afraid of offending her?"

"That about sums up the situation. I know. I know all of this. But believe me I'll suffer any indignity for the love of that child. And I know, as soon as he's able to wipe his own bottom and can dress himself and get along without much trouble, and my wife finds another meal-ticket, there's a very real chance I will lose him. But whatever is for the best will work itself out. There's nothing I can do about it either way."

Beatrice shook her head in wonder. "I don't know if I should pity her, on account of your Tantric delights or say it serves her right."

"The practices are very serious. It's not about the physical,.... that's not how it is,.."

"Of course. Of course. I do understand." She drew her fingers up as if to pray and pressed them against her forehead. "This is unexpected, that's all. Perhaps I'm supposed to ask at this point if you'll teach me. Is that it do you think?"

"I couldn't teach you. I'm not experienced enough. Everyone knows the mechanics, but with the Practices, its the psychology, the inner dynamics that must be conveyed, otherwise it's just a fancy way of having sex.."

There was a straw place-mat on the table. She took it up and began to fan herself with it. "Yes,... well, I'm sure it is,.. and one would need a skilled partner, who knew you very well of course."

"Not necessarily,... but I'm embarrassing you, now. I'm sorry. We must change the subject."

She fanned herself some more, but I was not convinced of her embarrassment. Indeed, I had reason to believe she was aroused and trying hard to calm herself. "So there we are," she went on. "There stands the balance of our lives. You seem more tranquil than I, more practised in the,... em,... meditative arts. I suppose you look at me and think I'm insane, to talk and dress and live the way I do? To live a dream. A fantasy?"

"On the contrary. You seem perfectly sane. And please don't assume I'm any calmer than the next bloke,... and if I may say, I think that what you've built here is unique, and special. Your clothes are also very beautiful, very feminine, and lovely."

She smiled as she smoothed down the lapels of her neat little jacket, then she

fluttered her lashes "You're trying to flatter me,... and it's working."

"They seem like new, your clothes."

"I make them myself,... from authentic materials,... I used to be a costume designer, but there wasn't much money in it. I'm a management consultant now."

"Then you have an interest,... I mean in recreating this period. This period is your dream. You even slow the hands of the clocks here. You live deliberately outside of time."

"It's as near perfect as I can manage."

"It *is* perfect,... and a little unsettling to a stranger. It makes me feel out of place, I mean dressed like this. It's almost as if I'm spoiling things with my modern fabrics."

"Well, with your permission we'll do something about that tomorrow. There are some clothes I'd like you to wear for me. I made them for my husband but he's never worn them. He couldn't bring himself to be a part of this. You look about his size. They should fit very well. Please don't be afraid; it's nothing kinky - just some period clothes, not much different to what you're wearing now."

"I don't know, Beatrice, it sounds like a step too far for me,... perhaps I should move on in the morning."

She looked afraid. "Please, you *must* share this weekend with me,.... completely. Don't you feel this is what it's all leading to? Don't you feel you were meant to do this?"

Though I had drained my wine ages ago, it had not yet tipped me into depression and I felt it still afforded me an analytical edge. "You seem to be constructing more than a fantasy here,... almost an alternate reality."

"What is reality?" she said. "Our whole lives are fantasy. Surely Ghita has taught you about that, about everything being an illusion?"

"Maya? Sure, and I've spent a good deal of time trying to explore the nature of it. But come Monday morning, 'Maya' starts to sound a bit weak when you've been up all night with a sickly child and you've still to clock on by half past eight. Perhaps Maya's only for the weekends. The workaday week is when our tangible reality comes back at us with a vengeance."

"No, that's the biggest illusion of all." She frowned. "Take me for instance. My costume is different for the workaday week - short skirt, dark stockings, long jacket,... overtly sexual of course, but a more widely acceptable fantasy, certainly more so than the demure creation I'm wearing now. I also pretend to have a sharp tongue to make men jump. We play a game. I pretend I'm helping to save a business from ruin, even though I usually know well in advance that it's past saving and I'll end up advising it be shut down. I start a new game next week,... a new company but otherwise the same thing

entirely,... it's a fantasy that has no real meaning, and it bores me."

"Then you have to find another way to live."

"Of course," she said. "And I believe I have. I am learning to live more and more in this house, in this time, in these clothes. Now, your turn. What is your workaday fantasy?"

"I'm a programmer," I said. "Fantasies are my business - computer games."

"Then you provide escape for others. That's good, surely!"

"I suppose so, but lately I've begun to notice how others seek their escape in only very limited ways. They like to sit at their computers pretending to shoot things, or they blow things up or drive vehicles very quickly and smash into other vehicles. We put in a lot of effort to make things more and more realistic, but so far as I can see, although the fantasies I create are becoming more authentic, what underlies them, the themes, the genres, the imagination,... it's all beginning to stagnate."

"Go on."

"That stagnation mirrors what I feel is going on in real life - in my life at any rate. I write code. I've studied mathematics, physics,... all tangible things, hard facts, exploring deducible outcomes,... there are no grey areas,... even though I know grey areas do exist. For me there has always been a sense of what is real and what is not, a line we cannot cross, a need to keep life tidy and simple and as predictable as a mathematical equation. So life becomes an elaborately constructed piece of code, yet lacking something,... lacking a certain untidiness: the intangible, the unknown, the mystery,... even though these are the very things that differentiate a human being from a machine - yet more and more we're taught to close them out, to close ourselves down,... Ghita says we shut these things out at our peril, that unconscious experience is a sea we must all learn to swim,... but I'm a child of my times, Beatrice, and I'm afraid of anything that does not compute."

"Afraid you'll drown?"

"Afraid I'm going insane even for talking about these things with you."

The clock began to chime, marking out the quarter hours, punctuating the intensity of that evening but without diminishing it, without altering the focus of that extraordinary conversation. Beatrice took a moment to consider, while the chimes faded, then picked up the threads once more: "We all live in some sort of fantasy, if not our own then someone else's. Better we should live our own fantasy and be happy, than live someone else's and be sad, don't you think? Look, we know when to conform to the grand fantasy, but we should also be free to slip inside one of our own creation. Either is valid, but both are fantasies."

Slowly, then she brushed the sleeve of her jacket as though she were stroking a cat. "It adds another dimension, you know," she went on. "The feel of

authentic cloth against one's skin, the brush of it, the weight. Given the right costume, we don't merely act out our fantasy,... we truly live it."

"You're an amazing woman,... you've somehow opened up a rift in time,... you've poured out an entire ocean of unconsciousness for yourself to swim in here."

Now, at this point you might be thinking differently. You might be thinking for example that what she'd actually done was to carve out for herself an elaborate escape, a retreat from a tangible reality that she'd begun to have trouble coping with, that what she was actually doing here was acting out the figments of a disturbed imagination, that it was somehow unhealthy. Don't chastise yourself; it's a reasonable conclusion to draw in isolation from the atmosphere of that house, and her presence, but that night it was very clear what had to be done, very clear the reason we had been brought together.

"I can stay until Tuesday," I said. "After that I'll be missed, but until then, yes, I'll play this game with you."

"And you'll,... wear my clothes?"

"Of course, yes, if it pleases you."

I saw a shiver pass through her and she blushed. "That pleases me very much," she said.

"And I'll do anything else you ask me to. Like you said, when we came down off the fell, I am yours now. Do with me as you will."

"Your presence here is enough,... except perhaps,... if I might be allowed to call you,... Joshua?"

And so it was I began my initiation into the world of Cragside. You might question our mutual frankness that night, for looking back there was an opening of our hearts and an intensity of examination that exceeded the norm. Indeed had we merely slept together, it would not have been so strange. But of course our intimacy had gone beyond such a simple act as that. It had been the intimacy of very young children, children who's instinct is to trust, and not to hide their hearts.

We talked on into the small hours, though it seemed a passing moment. Not since the intensity of my teenage fancies had time ceased to be. Eventually though, we retired and Beatrice showed me to my room. It was of a generous size and yet so cold I balked at the prospect of undressing. Everywhere was the same, away from the eternally warm kernel of the kitchen, life at Cragside was more closely connected with the natural status of the earth and the season - cold in winter, warmer in summer - but never the same sterile, disconnected, centrally heated, air-conditioned constancy of modern times.

"I would have lit a fire," she explained as she stood behind me with the lamp. "But obviously, I could not be sure when you would come to me."

"It's fine," I said. "It looks very,... comfortable."

The floor was mainly bare boards, dark stained and polished, with just a square of carpet at the bedside. The bed was iron and substantial, and there were many shelves of books. I scanned the shelves for something contemporary, but again nothing gave the game away - they were all turn of the century works,... reference and novels, though I supposed the books should have looked more like new.

There was a wash stand and a wardrobe and a roll top desk, all mahogany and somewhat distressed by long years of service. It was not exactly Thomas Chippendale, more likely a local maker, plain farmhouse furniture and like the clock in the kitchen already antique at the turn of the century. The walls were of painted plaster, a deep shade of blue and in good condition. The bed cover was a good match, as was the carpet. I did not know if such co-ordinating decor was in keeping, but I saw no reason why not. Altogether, the room possessed a calming atmosphere and suddenly I relished the prospect of staying the night, of waking amongst those old things and all that beautiful wood.

Perhaps it would be warmer, I thought, in the morning.

She transferred the light from her own lamp to one that stood on the windowsill. Then she took a night-shirt of thick cotton from a drawer. I watched as she laid it out upon the bed and smoothed it down, and with the slow movement of her palm, I imagined she was savouring the feel of it.

"Wear this," she said, then seeing my hesitation added quickly: "This is an old house. You'll be cold in just your skin."

She left me then, and I had the feeling I was in the presence of a master. Softly, softly,... wear this tonight,.... otherwise you'll be cold! But as I picked up the shirt, I felt a tingling in my palm as if the charge she had induced by her own touch was now discharging through me. The cloth felt heavy, but smooth, and when I finally gathered the nerve to strip, I was grateful for the warmth of it - the warmth and the astonishing comfort it afforded against my flesh.

The bed creaked under my weight as I sank deep into the mattress, and all the layers of sheets and blankets and covers had a weighty feel as they folded around me. The pillows too were deep and comfortable, the pillowcases smooth against my cheek. I felt like a child again, so small in such a huge bed and so impossibly weighted down with comfort, so firmly tucked in.

For a while, I did not extinguish the light but kept it safe at the bedside. Outside, a breeze moved the leaves, sending up a soft rustling at the pane, and buried somewhere in the sounds of the night, I heard the steady rhythm of a beck. Finally, turning down the lamp and extinguishing the flame, I was engulfed in a profound blackness, so that the sound of the trees and the water were my only contact with the world.

I was asleep in minutes. I slept soundly, plunging quickly through the

gossamer layers of unconsciousness and I was sure I did not dream, though Beatrice would have it otherwise. She said I dreamed the vision of her sitting on the bed, a candle flickering on the table while she unlaced her night-dress to reveal the beautiful swell of her breast, a nipple jutting proud above its pink aureole. And likewise she would have it that I dreamed the dipping of her finger into a jar of honey from which the label had been steamed,... and the smearing of it around her nipple.

She leaned close, smothering me in the feel of her night-dress and the scent of starch and soap and the lavender of her hair. And thus it was she cradled my head and offered me her honeyed breast. I felt the nipple poised against my lips and I could not speak without accepting it into my mouth, could not escape without pushing her aside,... a thing I could not bring myself to do. Meanwhile she waited, her chin upon the top of my head, her arms wrapped around me, waiting - willing me, it seemed, to take her in. I felt her body shiver, felt the hardness of her nipple, the coolness of the breast she offered and finally, I parted my lips, timidly at first, but then I opened my mouth wide to gorge upon her as the seductive flavour coiled around my tongue.

"There now," she said. "You see how sweet our dreams can be?"

The moment was fleeting. All I remember was the taste of her, and then she was withdrawing, fastening the laces of her night-dress. I wanted more, but she put her finger to her lips as if to shush me, then took the candle and the light with her.

## Chapter 10

## The breath of the dragon

In the morning I was surprised to find myself waking up, surprised I suppose that I could have slept at all after what had happened. I felt guilty and ashamed, and I was determined to leave Cragside as soon as I could - except my clothes had been taken and in their place lay the costume she had wanted me to wear. It was the outfit of an Edwardian country gentleman: quality tweeds and a pair of fine, rugged brogues. Also missing were my wallet and my watch.

With the attitude of one on the verge of sobering up, I dressed, if only to spare my blushes, then went downstairs to ask for the return of my things. For all our fine words the night before, we seemed to have set our course for nothing more than a cheap affair and I was surprised I could have misjudged things so much.

When I found her, I realised she had already been up for some time. The kitchen table was set with willow patterned china and she had been baking, so that the air was sweet with the smell of fresh bread. When I walked in she gave a little start and then gasped with the shock of something I could not imagine.

"Joshua! My God!"

She turned her back and pressed her wrist to her lips while she recovered her composure.

"Everything seems to fit," she said, at last, her hands visibly trembling. "Your own clothes were a terrible mess. I've washed them. I hope you don't mind. They're on the line; it's a fine day, so they should dry in no time."

"That was very kind of you," I said, not sure if it was kind or not.

"Do they feel comfortable? How are the shoes?"

"Everything seems perfect," I said. "Even the shoes."

I could not detect even a hint of what had passed between us,... no vestige of desire, no morning after embarrassment. It was odd.

"You look so handsome," she said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Not terribly well, no."

"Perhaps it was the strange bed. I'm always like that, first night away somewhere. You were comfortable though? And warm enough? I know these old houses take some getting used to."

It didn't happen, she was saying. Forget it, forget the taste of my honeyed breast. But I was too worked up to be discrete about it:

"You didn't come into my room?"

"I came in to fetch your clothes. You seemed fast asleep. I would have brought some tea but I didn't like to wake you."

"No, I mean last night. You came into my room, last night."

She shook her head, but all the same didn't seem completely certain - a hint of the lie perhaps? "Was I sleepwalking? Sometimes I do. I hope I was decent!"

"You seemed wide awake to me."

"Could you have dreamed it?" she asked, which seemed hardly any more convincing than the possibility of her sleepwalking. "Dreams have a habit of being more vivid here. There's a magnetic anomaly in the crags above the house,... I'm not making it up,.. it's a compound of iron,..."

"I know about the magnetite,... a compass is useless up on Drummaur Fell."

"Then perhaps you also know how such things can have an effect on certain people. They see things, feel things. The last person to own this house more or less gave the place away, saying it was haunted. But he was just afraid of his own imagination. You need a pure and blameless heart to live here, otherwise your darker side will find you out and drive you mad. I should have warned you."

"Beatrice, I did not dream it."

"You're looking at me as if you don't believe me, as if,... what? What do you imagine we did last night?"

"Need you ask?"

She looked at me firmly then, not quite angry, but getting there. "Describe your dream to me."

"You mean,... word for word?" I faltered. What kind of game was this?

"If you're accusing me of something, I should at least know what it is."

"It doesn't matter, " I said, backing down.

"No, clearly it does. You are aware that dreams contain messages?"

"Of course,..."

"Then it's important to understand them." She drew up a chair and invited me to sit opposite. "It might carry a meaning for both of us, something to guide us. Tell me! What did we do?"

"I'm not that good with,... dreams," I said, hoping to change the subject but she persisted.

"Describe it," she said.

I was irritated, so sure I was that she was merely teasing me but I decided to play along and began recounting the experience. She listened closely,

encouraging me to go on with gentle movements of her head. And finally as we approached the more intimate details: "You're not making any of this up?"

"Why would I?"

"Then which of my breasts did you see?"

"Does it matter?"

"Was it this one?" She patted her left bosom and I shook my head. "It was this one then." She began to unbutton her blouse. "You saw it clearly in your dream?"

"Yes, but just hold on a minute,..."

"No, I feel uncomfortable, thinking you suspect I'm making all of this up. It changes things between us in a way I don't like. You have to understand you were dreaming, and I can prove it to you. Do you trust me this far?

"I'm not sure,.."

"Then you'll just have to bear with me."

She slipped the strap of her chemise and a long white breast spilled out into the palm of her hand. "There, you see?"

I looked away, ashamed, knowing at once it had not been her. I was thunderstruck. "I'm sorry, Beatrice. Please forgive me. I've never dreamed anything so real in all my life!"

"I take it the lady of your dreams bore the image of my face but not the marks of my body?"

I nodded, blushing. She was still cradling her breast and I sneaked another bashful look at what I had not expected to see: It was a tattoo, a dragon and artfully done, coiled around her breast in a sensuous spiral, its tongue curling into the broad pink of her aureole.

"It's a pretty thing," she said, tucking herself away. "I was much younger when I had it done. The men I've known,... none of them expected to see it. Everyone seems to carry their own expectations of the sort of woman I am, and this doesn't figure in their equation at all. It's the only tattoo I have, by the way. I'm not like the illustrated woman or anything."

"Truly, I'm sorry, Beatrice,..." And also relieved, I thought.

"Didn't it strike you as an odd thing what we did, I mean in the dream? It was distinctly,... symbolic wouldn't you say? A very Jungian sort of dream. You know Jung?"

"Yes,... but I can't interpret it. I can't get beyond the image,..."

"Well, quite,... I imagine it was a little startling. But you haven't told me everything? How you felt for example? What were your thoughts, Joshua?"

"Arousal? No,... that's not right. It was something else,... your taste, I mean

the taste was wonderful, so sweet and nourishing,... indescribable. It seemed to fill me up,... swell me with something more satisfying than I've ever known. And then I felt guilty that we'd done it. I thought of Ghita. I felt I'd let her down."

"Ghita? But tell me why should Ghita mind if we were intimate?"

"She wouldn't,... "

"Tell me some more about Ghita? What does she mean to you?"

"Ghita?" It was hard to summarise. "Everything," I said. "What with Emily,... my wife - I would have fallen apart without Ghita. She held me together somehow, gave me a reason to go on. She teaches me, sustains me,... nour... nourishes me."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Think, what was it you got from me last night that made you feel ashamed when you thought of Ghita?"

She was smiling, and when she saw it dawn upon me, she reached across and laid her hand upon the back of mine. The dream had not been about sex, but simply nourishment, for what more potent symbol of nourishment could there be than a well rounded breast? And it had been a symbol reinforced and doubly underlined by the smearing of the honey. In Beatrice there was something I would not find in Ghita.

"You are in love with Ghita," she said. "How can you not be? I think if I knew her I should be in love with her myself. And I'm certain she must love you, but you must not be ashamed to find your own way, to take the nourishment of another who might offer it. I am not Ghita. I am Beatrice, but the dream tells us you must feed a while on what's in me."

She rose then and paced the kitchen. "I will give you anything you want," she went on. "But you must be clear who it is that feeds this part of you. It is Beatrice! And for Beatrice to go on existing, you must feed her in return - provide her with what she needs. This house, this world I have created, everything I have done here cannot be complete without the man I've imagined all these years sharing it with me."

"I understand what you're saying. And I will be that man for you. But this weekend is all the time we have. How can it be enough? There's a lifetime to be unravelled here."

"You understand the rules of fate?"

"As much as anyone. Are there rules?"

"If this weekend is all we have, it shall be all the time we'll need."

It was a fine morning and after breakfast, I ventured out a little way to find myself suddenly stilled by beauty. The house stood in a ring of mature trees, all bright with their fresh spring foliage. And above this encircling canopy rose the fells, a deeper green, mottled here and there with patches of rusty

bracken and punctured by fangs of rock. Above the fells was a cobalt sky and everything, I thought, seemed far too vivid for any of it to be real. I knew all these fells by name, and had walked the little known paths that snaked from one to the next, gazed down from them into the lonely depths of this very valley, little suspecting the presence of such a place as Cragside.

There was a garden to the front, and lawns that were overdue for a cut, also herbaceous borders bursting with old established stock - rhododendrons ablaze with pink, and azaleas in orange and red. I followed the sound of the beck and came upon a modest cascade,... crystal water running over a tumble of boulders, the sunlight dancing - light and rocks and running water - the essence of the Lakes. By a shingle bank, in a still pool, I saw a pebble of pink veined quartz. It stood out among the darker stones and I could not help but fish it out from the clear water, then I sat beside the cascade, turning it in my hand.

I felt like someone else that morning, for such was the disorientating effect of that place. Perhaps it was the unsettling business of the dream but the old me had gone, fled the dream that was Beatrice and Cragside. Different rules applied here, the rules Ghita had taught me, rules difficult for a novice to live by in the tangible world without always questioning one's sense of reason. But Cragside was a place out of time, a figment of one woman's imagination. To make sense of it, I had merely to let go and trust things to reveal themselves.

The person who sat by the beck that morning was the person Ghita had awakened, a man still little more than a stranger to his host consciousness, and he was there that uncommonly beautiful morning in the person of Beatrice's lost love. A part of me did indeed feel a strange kind of love for this odd woman. But Beatrice was the creation of someone else, someone very different, a woman I did not know, a management consultant she'd said, a worldly individual with an ordinary, everyday existence, a woman I might not have looked at more than once, a woman I might even have loathed. Is all of this even possible you ask? Do I stretch your imagination too far?

If truth be told, stranger things have happened to me, usually at the instigation of my guide and teacher. Indeed, there is nothing stranger than the alchemical bonding of the male and female spirit, the binding of two parts of an eternal essence that otherwise resides in the respective psyches of a pair of perfect strangers. My partner for such practices had those twelve months past been a very pretty Chinese lady, some years my senior whom Ghita had chosen, she said, for the similarity of our temperaments.

This woman and I always came to each other after an hour of preparatory meditation and bathing, and always in the same room of the place known to us as The Retreat. The scent of this woman was cinnamon, the scent of heaven for me in those days, so that I always carried a little sachet in my pocket to be administered in case of emergencies. Together, in spite of our inexperience, we had indeed begun to touch something of the eternal in each other. With her I had knelt in the presence of a goddess and worshipped with tears in my eyes,

all that is feminine and eternal. But she knew nothing of my life outside that room, as I knew nothing of hers. We did not even know each other's names. She might have been a millionairess, or a kitchen slave, a lonely spinster or a housewife and a mother. Such were the limits of human consciousness that perhaps, had we known each other in the worldly way, we could not have reached the places we otherwise had.

So no, you must forgive me, but it did not seem uncommonly strange to have woken up one sunny Saturday morning, in the spring of 1901, to find myself already in love with a figment of someone else's imagination.

I turned then to see her standing quietly, watching me. Then she kicked off her shoes and sat down upon the bank, lifting her skirts and stretching out her legs into the pool.

"Odd, isn't it?" she said. "This thing that's happening."

"Yes."

"You mustn't feel you are a prisoner here, you know? Don't the fells call you? Walk them, feel free, but then come back to me."

"I think I'd be afraid to go in case I met someone on the path."

"Afraid? In case they thought your clothes were odd?"

"No, it's not that. Out there, beyond those trees, the further you go, the greater the chance of seeing something that'll wake you up, bring you back to ordinary times. You must feel the same. This sanctuary only stretches so far, surely?"

"If you feel that way, then the house has already cast its spell upon you. The best time is evening. North of here's the lake, and the fells are always busier, but south and east, and even Drummaur Fell to the west, will be quiet. I've walked them for years and never come across a soul."

"Except last night."

"Last night was different."

"It could easily have been someone else though,... and consequently someone else sitting here this morning. I mean it was only happen-chance that it was me on the fell last night."

"You might say that, but you don't believe it. It was always going to be you. Have you never stepped into a stranger's shoes? I mean literally? And is there anything more alien than the feel of them on your feet? Now look at your shoes and tell me, are they anybody else's but your own? Joshua, you know that it is you."

That's how it always was with Beatrice. We would talk and I'd find myself inexorably drawn in until I truly believed I could be none other than whom she said I was, the energy that shaped her own fantasy spilling over and shaping my own. I don't know how far this would have gone had something

not always happened to bring me gently back towards the earth.

I've lived in numerous houses and always found there was much to be learned from a place by simply turning the soil of its garden, or by cutting its grass. These simple services would yield some measure of co-operation from the bricks and mortar and they would grant an insight into whether or not the two of you were going to get along. So I offered to cut the grass, and till the borders, and this pleased her, so I was happy to do it.

I found the mower in a cabin to the rear of the house. It was an ancient hand pushed thing, its blades dull and barely moveable. The cabin also contained a wealth of tools, stored neatly in drawers and wrapped in oiled rags for protection. The tools, like the mower, were all old and bore signs of much use. There were many carpentry tools, old chisels and block planes and tenon-saws. The house was isolated, I thought,.... it would be as well to have a supply of tools at hand, but I doubted they were contemporary with Beatrice's chosen period.

This was the first anomaly that let some of the pressure out of the fantasy of Cragside, and though I was able to pretend fairly well that they might have been genuine, I was grateful to them also for their reassurance. But then I noticed an old wardrobe and could not resist having a look inside. It was there I discovered Amanda Fleetwood, and learned as much about her in those few stolen moments as I still know today.

Amanda was a three quarter length pinstripe ladies suit from Berketex. She was a low neckline blouse of plain white cotton, and a mauve silk scarf, both from Next. She was a long Burberry raincoat, and silk underthings from La Perla. She was a pair of black Playtex stockings and Gucci high heeled shoes. And the smell of Amanda Fleetwood was not lavender but Chanel Number Five. I closed the door guiltily, as if I'd seen something I should not, then I wheeled the mower out and tried to picture the owner of those things, tried to picture Beatrice in that suit, but so firmly was her image already rooted in this other time, those other clothes, I could not think of her any other way.

So I mowed, then tilled the borders until the air was filled with sweetness of cut grass and the rising scent of a fertile earth. Slowly, the old house began to yield a little. It was built entirely of dry slate courses, as is the custom in that part of the world. A tall rambling rose clung to the sunny south wall, and a climbing Hydrangea to the north. As the light changed, the colours of the slate changed from green to blue in a strange, chameleon like transition, but for all this talk of strangeness and spells, I could find no angle of the house that appeared sinister. It was homely and romantic, and I liked it immensely; I sensed also that it liked me.

Beatrice came out now to check her washing, and I thought to myself as she reached up to the line that she did not have the figure of a Toby jug, nor the sexual allure of a sack of potatoes. I wondered if her husband had really been so blind as to think she did, or if it was more the image she carried of herself.

I had often noticed how a woman's allure was independent of her physical appearance - that the plainest woman could smoulder sex - secrete it from her pores and make herself a magnet for the attentions of men, while the most beautiful could be quite wooden and cold, and repellent.

Beatrice was neither of those things, not quite plain, and not smouldering, not physically beautiful, but also not wooden in her allure, yet I did not doubt that if she so chose she could fit herself into any role she pleased. Watching her, I had a flash of Amanda, striding down a corridor, heels clicking hips swaying in her skirt,... the scent of her as she passed, a sulky side glance as if to say "What do you think you're looking at?"

Is that who she really was?

Surely not! She was Beatrice, truly,.. completely!

"You make me feel guilty," she said. She was carrying a tray on which there stood a tall jug and glasses. "Lemonade?"

She carried the tray to table underneath the shade of a fine willow, overlooking the garden. The willow fronds acted like a feathery curtain. She moved with perfect balance, and such elegance, I thought. I did not know a great deal about Edwardian ladies costume, but my experience of that week caused me realise how authentically she wore her clothes. This lent to her body a certain shape, a certain way of moving that divorced the image of Amanda from Beatrice completely. I was relieved: the owner of that look and that upright elegance was definitely not Amanda.

We chinked our glasses in the sunshine and she looked tenderly at me. "Is it really you, Joshua?"

"Yes," I said, trying hard to forget what I'd seen, trying hard to pull the clothes of Joshua around me a little tighter, to hide from Amanda in the role of someone else's lover. "Yes, it's me. But tell me Beatrice. Where have I been all this time?"

"You went to South Africa to fight the Boer."

"I did?"

"You seem surprised. Do you not remember?"

"But surely, I wouldn't fight anyone,... it's not in my nature,... Why did I have to fight the Boer?"

"Your family were poor. Thaddeus inherited the farm, so you joined the army."

"Thaddeus?"

"Your older brother. Don't you remember him?"

"But I would never have left you, Beatrice."

"You had no choice. It's the way of the world. And there was always a feud

between you and Thaddeus."

"How long has it been then?"

"Two years, and no word. But I've been faithful to your memory all this time."

As she spoke she wove her spell and I wanted very much to believe I was her lover returned from a distant war, perhaps shell shocked and much changed, longing to uncover memories of a more tranquil time. "Why didn't we marry?" I asked. "Only I'm sure I would have proposed. I sense an affinity between us, or I wouldn't have told you as much about myself as I have. What happened? Did you turn me down?"

There was something very unusual happening now. We had become like actors ad-libbing, sounding off each other and creating something unique, something that neither of us controlled entirely.

"You didn't propose," she said, her tone was wistful. "But it was always on your mind."

"There was a problem?"

"Your parents disapproved of me."

"I can't understand why. You seem perfectly lovely."

"There were rumours," she said. "Things in my past, things I am supposed to have done."

"Rumours?"

"You've forgotten what they say about me? That I'm not quite sane? That I've had too many lovers? That I walk the fells naked by moonlight and lure travellers to my lonely house, where I keep them imprisoned for weeks and make love to them? That I might carry myself like a lady, but that underneath I'm nothing more than a simpleton? The brainless love-child of country blood that lay too close?"

"None of this can be true, Beatrice, or I would not love you as I do."

She smiled, looking for a moment more than just a little dangerous. "You don't care if these things are true or not. You think I'm mysterious. I take you to places you've never been before. I stir emotions in you so powerful they make you tremble." She was frowning as she spoke now, as if meaning every word. And looking at her I could conceive of a time when it might indeed have been true. "But you remember none of this," she said with an accusing little pout.

"I have a distant memory of such things, once," I replied. "Beatrice, you have to help me a little. How far does this go? What do you require from me, really?"

She took something from her apron pocket then and sealed it in the palm of my hand. It was a pocket watch, very old, its glass scratched, its face

yellowed, the gilt case worn almost entirely back to brass. "Time," she said. "Only your time, my love. Stay with me a while, and when your reality calls you back, we shall climb Drummaur Fell together, then part company at the tarn of dreams, where we met."

"And then?"

"Then I shall hold you in my memory whenever I am here, and I shall sit of an evening at the tarn, waiting for your return, but knowing you will never come back to me. And you will *not* come, Joshua, no matter how much I plead with you to end my loneliness. The fell, this valley, this house,... all of it must then be forbidden to you, to the real you whose name I do not know. I must ask this as a solemn promise. We have these few days together, but afterwards, we shall never meet again."

"I don't understand."

"Fantasies lack one thing to make them real, and that's pain. In a short time I shall remember in the finest detail how much I have loved Joshua, and then I shall lose him."

I was horrified. "This is such a tranquil place. Why poison it? Why must Beatrice be sad?"

"The more I can feel, the more real this world becomes for me."

My heart began to ache with the sudden knowledge that I would lose her, that we did indeed have only these few days together. It is an ache I've felt these ten years since, and now of course,... now more than ever. I had wanted it to be the beginning of something, her rescuing of my life perhaps,... the discovery of one gem of happiness in an existence that was increasingly plagued by misery.

No, I thought: this was too good, too precious an encounter to throw away. I would come back to her, make her love me: me, Matthew! I would take her as my lover and blow my shambles of a marriage into dust, and damn the consequences!

"Beatrice,..."

"No. I know what you are thinking, but you must promise me."

"Promise?" A part of me hesitated. What about Aaron? How could I hurt him? He knew me as his father,... and I loved him? No! Keep it all together, keep it neat and tidy,... no matter that it's a sham, for a sham is sometimes easier than the truth. Who was that? Who spoke those words? Not me, surely, not Matthew. Joshua? Is that you? But don't you want to be with Beatrice?

"You say I mustn't come back to you, no matter how much you might plead with me, but that implies,... you want to keep in touch?"

"Yes, I would like to write to you, from here, if you can bear it. Just now and then, pretend you're really out there in the world, and if you could see your

way to writing back, it would make it all the more real,.. like a moment ago, when we were spinning something strange together."

I looked at the watch, gave its crown a contemplative wind, its ratchet sounding soft and smooth in the cool morning air. I guessed it was set to the old clock in the kitchen, the pair of them marking the same peculiar time.

"I would like you to have that watch. It's just an old thing I found in a drawer. Take it with you when you leave this place, keep it to this Cragside time if you can. That way you'll always be a part of things here."

I was numb with shock, and speechless at the long years I saw stretching out from this place. What was it that had captured me so? I could have come upon her last night in a different way, followed her back for wine and sex, then been glad to go, creeping out in the early dawn embarrassed and ashamed, but otherwise unburdened.

"We only met yesterday," I said. "How can this already feel like a parting after many years?"

"Like we've always known each other, you mean?" Gently, she stroked my arm. "Well, haven't we? Have we not always been coming to this, you and I?"

And in my heart I felt she was right. In a way that was yet to be explained, we had indeed always been coming to this.

## Chapter 11

## Becoming Joshua

For many women, I think the dressing up would have been the main thing, and at first it seemed that way with Beatrice. Perhaps that was how it had begun for her, but dressing up can only take us so far, and soon the reality of our own time always finds a way of intruding, of returning us to our workaday skins. And I suppose there was still a part of me that denied the miracle of what she had achieved, that these ensembles were merely disguises and not the carefully crafted tools of a remarkable psychology.

Thus far she'd worn a dark tweed suit, and a plain cotton dress, and that afternoon there was a wine red outfit with a small felt hat. All of this was perfectly detailed, worn with the utmost precision and adorned with fine, period jewellery that must have come from antique markets or from the hand-me-down trinket boxes of her own ancestry. Also, from what I had already glimpsed of her foundation-wear, I supposed she continued the authenticity down her flesh, for only in that way could she have carried her clothes as she did, with the upright poise of stiffened corsetry.

But of course this was more than dressing up, more than a mere clothing fetish, though of course the emotional engagement with this clothing was perhaps a part of it in the sense that it provided a catalyst for other unconscious contents to clamber up into the daylight. A catwalk model has the ability to project the clothes she is wearing, and yet no matter how beautiful she is, no matter how outgoing her personality might be, she subordinates herself to the clothes, makes the clothes shine through her, rather than the other way around. Beatrice however was more the actress, someone who could project her character through the things she wore; she sparked from them, interacted with them in a way that rendered totally believable the manifestation of what she seemed to be becoming.

In the afternoon she persuaded me to walk beyond the house, and so with tweed jacket and stick, and trousers tucked into socks at my knees, I felt the Spring sunshine on my face, as arm in arm I strolled with Beatrice in her finery. At first she'd said we would not go very far, that we should merely have the impression of walking out together. I believe she meant this, but as we settled into our roles, it was natural that we should want to prolong that extraordinary time we spent together. So we walked and walked,... and walked.

I might have felt like a stage prop, just another device through which she could project herself had she not taken such pains with me, making conversation, trying to distract me from my self consciousness and from the ever present fear we would be discovered and gawked at. But we were not discovered, and as the afternoon wore on, it grew to be of only passing importance anyway. Indeed we became so wrapped up in the bubble of ourselves that before the afternoon was out, I'm sure I would not have noticed

the presence of anyone else. Any actor will tell you that there comes a point in ad-libbing when characters take on a curious reality of their own, and then the actor must safeguard his own personality so he always has somewhere to return. Joshua, was thus a harmless diversion for me, for Matthew to observe, but for Beatrice, the creation was becoming something else, and I feared the place she might safely return to was perceptibly diminishing.

We switched lightly between realities, talking of both but always with an aim it seemed to understand the balance of the other's consciousness. I did not learn, for example, exactly where Amanda Fleetwood worked, or lived,... only that she felt her life on a suburban executive housing estate to be thoroughly banal, and that several of the men who worked under her had clearly developed male submissive fantasies.

"And Joshua?" I asked. "Is he submissive to Beatrice?"

"Beatrice hasn't the wits to play that game my love. Joshua is by far the smarter, the deeper one, but seems content most days to subordinate himself out of simple love for her,... only chiding when he thinks she's dangerously wrong to do and say the things she does. And when he chides her, she feels a thrill, so that sometimes she's even naughty on purpose."

"That's odd. I had taken Beatrice to be wise."

"Then you're projecting something onto her she does not possess. I don't think Beatrice can consciously teach you anything. Ghita sounds infinitely wiser in that respect. Whatever it is that Beatrice can give you will be revealed perhaps only by fate. I doubt Beatrice would recognise it, for if she could she would already have given it to you."

"But Beatrice is the creator: this place, this time, this story of her love for Joshua,... that seems a very clever thing to me."

"You confuse the creator with the creation. As time passes, and things become complete, the creator will withdraw more and more, and then Beatrice will simply be,... as she was meant to be. A simple soul, and free."

"Beatrice is not complete?"

"No,... there's still too much of the creator in her. Though less by the second,... especially since you came along. With you here, I feel things accelerating."

We followed a narrow path that climbed gently up the side of Drummaurdale, talking as we went so that neither of us noticed how very steep it was. Finally we reached a low pass until we spied another long, straight valley running east. We did not descend, into its embrace but contoured around to a stand of Scott's Pine in whose midst there nestled a glassy pool, its bank thick with the leaves of water lilies, bright green and juicy. And all around the air was sharp with the scent of pine. Here we sat upon a fallen log. I would have expected that log to be worn smooth by countless bottoms, so magical a place this was, but we might have been the first for all I know.

So that she did not spoil her skirt we spread out a rug, and though this was indeed a remote little place, the two of us seated daintily like that seemed to lend to it an air of homely familiarity. I wondered then if had really chanced across it at all, and had instead created it, given birth to it from our imaginations, as we had apparently given birth to our selves.

"You've gone quiet Joshua. Tell me what you're thinking,... even if you fear it might hurt me."

"It was nothing,... really."

"No, you are hiding from me now. Our time will be all too brief so we must not waste it by playing hide and seek games."

"Very well. I was thinking that Beatrice is a magical and a mysterious woman, that Joshua cannot prevent himself from falling in love with her,.... but Beatrice is still an escape from the mind of the creator. Would it not be kinder to heal the creator another way?"

"I see. But you said you did not mind if I was insane?"

"I said it made no difference to our encounter,... if this is fated then everything you are is part of the alchemy between us. But still,..."

"I *was* going insane," she said, "That is until Beatrice came along. Do you know, the creator spent six years on drugs that made her feel not quite so ragged round the edges, but then she woke up one day and realised it wasn't so much a cure as a way of not minding the pain any more?"

Not minding! Her words struck a chord with me, for certainly my own motivation these past few years was the search for a way of not minding things any more. "I understand perfectly. Please, go on."

"I haven't taken a pill in over a year,... and I feel better than I can ever remember, so why question the peculiarity of the treatment, when it's plain that the patient is feeling much better. I'd thought, given your own unconventional habits, you might have appreciated that."

I smiled at her tactful description of my eccentric pursuits. "Forgive me. I've looked over the edge myself from time to time and been prescribed the pills that calm you down. But I used to think it was like having a spike stuck in the middle of my forehead - the pills made it so I no longer cared,... but it's better really if you can find a way to take the spike out and start to heal, start to think properly again. For me it was Ghita, while for your creator it's Beatrice. But,...."

"What is it? What are you afraid of?"

"My cure seems to be slowly giving me back to myself, while yours seems to be giving you to another. What you describe to me is like the dimming of one consciousness in order to give brightness to another, but this is a consciousness that doesn't actually exist. So, are you not in a way just,... killing yourself?"

A moment passed, stretching into the long silence of that place. "I,... don't see it that way," she said, her voice soft, still riding in on the waves of her thoughts. " I much prefer what I'm becoming. Is it like killing myself? It really doesn't feel that way,... more like creaming off the best of me and tipping away all the staleness that's left over. And perhaps there's no such thing as individual consciousness anyway. We are the same, and everything we think ourselves to be is just the accumulated dross of our lives. To find ourselves we must tip it all out, and only when the last bit has gone do we wake up realise our true nature."

Time stood still for us and that grove became a lost world. I have returned to it many times since that afternoon, but never has it been the same as it was for us then, and the difference was Beatrice. One of us would say something and the other would think before answering. This thinking could take a long time, several minutes of silence while the necessary connections were made, and then the conversation would continue as if it had not been broken. Had it not been for the rhythm of day and night, there would have been nothing actually to mark the time at all and our conversation might have gone on for days.

"Expressions of polarity, then?" I ventured. "The yin and the yang, the male essence and the female? Is that what you think we are? That our individuality is irrelevant? That we might be whomever we please?"

"Certainly, that seems possible to me. I have a shape, a life, a language,... I am capable of stringing together thoughts, of expressing ideas, but how much do these things really help in granting me an understanding of my life? Our life is flesh and blood and real. If I cut myself it hurts and I bleed. If I do not eat, I shall die,... but its how we view ourselves that's the illusion. And one illusion is just as valid as another."

"Then Beatrice understands these things better than me. Is that what she has to teach me I wonder?"

"You are too kind, my darling. But really, Beatrice understands nothing. What's more she is perfectly accepting of it. Perhaps that is her secret. Perhaps there comes a stage in our learning when we have to accept the greatest wisdom is in accepting oblivion. This could be the meaning of your dream, the issue from my breast, the sweetness that will fill you, the insight you require. I don't know,... Or perhaps you are the witness sent to observe the creation that is me."

Following our time at the tarn of lilies, I began to detect less and less of the creator, of Amanda Fleetwood, in our conversation, and more of Beatrice. And it was true that Beatrice was not so clever as Amanda, not so full of probing insight, her presence being marked by a lighter spirit, a spirit that was more accepting of the land and the mystery that lay upon it. Likewise, gradually I became more adept at reading these things and knowing at once to whom I was speaking.

The body of Amanda Fleetwood and the will of Beatrice proved to be an

energetic team and we set off once more, this time following the line of the southern ridge, then slightly down towards the head of an even lonelier valley to the south. It was by now after six, Cragside time, and the fells had about them a profound stillness.

We had come to a small ruin, just the single weathered gable of a long abandoned chapel presiding over a chaos of rubble. There were still gravestones lying scattered in the tall grass, canted over at untidy angles, or lying flat and half obscured. Some were still legible, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and it suddenly troubled me to think of these lost souls lying up here alone, abandoned by time, the last vestiges of their names being erased by successive winters. But what did that matter if the essential part of us was eternal and all there was to forget was the ephemera of our lives,... for what value was that to anyone? Indeed what value was it to me? Better forgotten, thought the part of me that was Matthew, except it frightened him to think of losing those vital connections of love to Aaron, and to Ghita,... and to the one who was becoming Beatrice.

"A lonely place, " I said.

"They're not dead, you know?" said Beatrice, perhaps reading the haunted look in Matthew's eyes. "Their bones lie here, but not the people." This was Amanda talking, I thought.

"You mean they're in you and me?" said Matthew. "That we once lived life through their eyes, as we now live it through ours?"

Amanda gave an affirmative nod and Matthew smiled at her. "You don't really believe that's true?" he said.

"It's a theory,... and one could easily be forgiven for having high hopes about it." She laughed prettily then, a laugh that faded into the most serene smile. "There's no harm in it," she went on. "Surely it's better to have a calmer view of such things than to live in perpetual dread of an end that's inescapable."

"That's why I want answers."

"And what does Ghita say? You must have asked her about this."

"She says the answer lies in stillness. I say the answer makes no sense, and she says how can I expect a meaningful answer to a meaningless question."

Amanda gazed at me for a while, but it was Beatrice who finally spoke. "Take me home now," she said and then she held out her hand for Joshua. He helped her to her feet, then the lovers linked arms and fell into the practised rhythm of their walk. When they were some distance away, Beatrice glanced back briefly at the ruin, at the stark black stones seeming like the most ancient of monuments in the midst of calm hills, washed over by the serenity of late afternoon.

"It's not a lonely place," she said. "Lonely feels more empty than this."

The house was waiting for us when we returned. It sought attention for its

own well-being, demanding I fetched wood and fed it to the stove then it might renew its contract of warmth and light, and life with us. But the wood seemed to be the limit of my duties, for Joshua was an old fashioned sort of man and not required for anything much around the house. It was Beatrice who made sweet tea, and then began preparations for dinner, something I suspect Amanda would not have permitted in her own home.

Matthew received his tea in the parlour with more gratitude than Beatrice required, and he secretly chided Joshua for the ease with which Beatrice was allowed to slave on his behalf. In his turn, Joshua told Matthew to be quiet, that he would be returning soon enough to the guilt and his sense of never being able to do enough for Emily. Still, Matthew cradled his guilt like a fractious babe and asked Beatrice if there was anything he could do. She told him to sit down, and finally Joshua dragged him outside to watch the fells sinking in their golden glory against the deepening blue of a cloudless sky.

I was still young then, and it shows up most clearly when I think back upon that time. Pursuit of spiritual matters outside of religion, is not an activity best suited to anyone who has not yet turned forty. The early period of adulthood is a time when we ought still to be making way under our own propulsion, towards goals of our own deciding,.. not yet aware that we will inevitably fetch ourselves up on the rocks of existential angst at some point in later life. True, Beatrice and I were both aged beyond our years, both our psychologies matured by close proximity to their imminent destruction, and so we both viewed things through slightly older eyes. Reading back through my journals of that time I see how much I was just setting out, but I seem to have understood enough to realise all of this meant something, even though I could not understand what it was, that all I had were feelings, feelings which immediately tied themselves into knots when I turned my attention upon them. It was for the future then, I'd thought, for future eyes to look back upon this period of my life and see the things I could not see.

The significance of that day was not apparent at the time and in fact lay in a much simpler act than any of the words we'd shared, words and thoughts I've scrutinised for clues during these long intervening years and it was simply this: I remember I was gazing up at the fells, great two thousand footers, with outcrops hanging above blue-green scree and seeming like rocks frozen in free-fall. I had just read the time from the watch and then Beatrice called to me.

"Dinner's ready, my love." she said.

I did not react to her use of the word love, as if it were an alien thing, a thing not meant,... for I knew she meant it, that Beatrice did indeed love her Joshua. So I turned and smiled. "Be right in," I said. We exchanged a look then that helped Joshua gain a more stable foothold in Matthew's psyche. Matthew sat back comfortably and bade Joshua do whatever it was she wanted of him.

Matthew simply let go, and in a twinkling, he became Joshua.

## Chapter 12

### Amanda Fleetwood's last moments

Life in those old houses was more intimate than in our time, on account of the light. When evening came on and the light drained into the shadows, people turned to their lamps and their candles, facing each other around a softer glow than we know of these days. Drawn closer by the bubbles of amber that contained them, people would talk, or read, or play cards, but always close, always with a conscious knowledge of sharing a central flame, a point of reference with another living, breathing person.

So it began that night for Joshua and Beatrice, first around the kitchen table, and then in the parlour where everything was neat and clean and the furniture gleamed darkly. It was cooler there, so Beatrice put a match to the fire she'd already laid, coals upon kindling. Then they sat at opposite sides of the hearth, watching as the fire grew and the room glowed, bewitching them with its kaleidoscopic show of shadow and light. So the room became a box of amber tossed upon the ocean of unconscious night, and Joshua understood then how stories told in parlours long ago had taken on a life of their own.

Speak of far away islands and the Caribbean sunlight pressed upon the door; speak of ghosts and night time terrors, and the heart stood still; speak of loves lost and the heart would ache; speak of loves found and the thought of warm embraces filled the heart with joy.

Beatrice stared at Joshua, her eyes black and sparkling, her expression still, like one impassively observing a play. Joshua tried to meet her gaze but could only do so now and then, and they would exchange brief smiles before he turned his eyes once more into the fire where he saw fantastic shapes, reflections of things burning within him, bright flares and sudden jets of smoke, and in the crackling of the coals he heard voices.

All this was strange and fantastic to him, the feel of that room and the feel of that woman staring at him. And the voices told him that when the fire had sunk back into its cherry coloured embers, Beatrice would look down, smooth the folds of her skirt upon her lap and say: "Shall we go up then?"

He nodded, then followed her, climbed the stairs, brushing his arm against the spidery aspidistra as he passed, so that it made his skin tingle.

Her room was a place of warm, feminine beauty - the dark gleam of polished wood and the crispy cleanness of the linen - no books here, just softness and comfort and sensuality. There was a large bed with a curtained canopy, drapes at the window, soft rugs underfoot and the scent of lavender. He saw also a large wicker chair, a dressing table and a long mirror. He gazed at all this a while from the threshold of her door, not daring to cross.

She set the lamp upon the night stand and drew the curtains.

"Come in," she said.

So he crossed the threshold and Matthew allowed him to do so without a murmur of complaint, taking refuge perhaps in the feeling that this was not him. She stood by the long mirror, straightening herself like a queen, and she then asked if he would kneel and remove her shoes.

"I'm wearing a corset," she explained. "So I can't bend to do it myself. Normally they're the last things I take off at night."

And so he knelt upon the square of rug by the mirror, so close he could smell the fabric of her skirt, and gently he removed her shoes, his fingers brushing her delicate ankles, soft and warm in her stockings. She remained still for him, hands lightly clasped, gazing down upon the top of his head. He felt her gaze, felt it burning there, felt the heat of a divine femininity.

"Thank you," she said, then motioned then with her eyes to the wicker chair. "If you would sit, it would please me if I could undress,... for you."

Joshua placed his hands upon her ankles, feeling their warmth through the soft gauze of her stockings. He was feeling something rare, something highly charged and vital and he knew that if he lived to be a hundred, and things went no further than this, it would still be the most erotically charged moment of his life.

"Beatrice," he breathed. "The feel of you."

"Would it be all right,... if I were to undress?"

Dry mouthed, he nodded, then sat and gazed at her as she faced him, preparing herself to undress, to expose the layers of herself to him. This would not have been right last night. It would have been something else then, a brief and meaningless encounter between strangers, but between Beatrice and Joshua it was different. It was a thing that had been coming for a long, long time. She began with the skirt, wine red and lovely as it slid to the floor revealing her underskirt, black and rustling, then this too was opened at the waist and pushed down to reveal in its turn her petticoat - more softness and prettiness. She watched him as her fingers worked the buttons of her bodice, one at a time, then peeling it open and letting it fall. All of this lacked the delicacy and the overt sensuality of a simple bra and pants but there was something, Joshua thought, that rendered even more vulnerable her femininity.

There was a short chemise covering a corset which she raised above her head, then quietly she unlaced the corset and let it fall. All the while she moved with a slow deliberation, looking directly at him, not smiling, but passive somehow, reading him. And Joshua was transfixed, initiated into her secret world, let in on the inner intimacies of Beatrice. She removed the petticoat and stood a while in a long chemise, before finally lifting it above her head. The dragon on her breast suddenly flashed in the amber light. She saw how his eyes were drawn by it, and she stoked her breast, observing then how his eyes were taken by the long knickers, down to her knees, drawn by little

ribbons, and amazingly it seemed to him, they were crotchless so that her inner thigh and mound were plainly visible.

She allowed herself a smile then: "Not intended for allure, you understand, but practicality." She slipped the waistband over her round hips and shimmied them down until she stood in only her knee length stockings, surrounded by a sea of cotton things.

And Joshua believed, had she not said that, not released the pressure from the room with a twist of humour, he would have had a heart-attack.

She seemed suddenly self conscious now as he gazed upon her nakedness, her weighty breasts, her soft, round stomach, and her mound, that seemed quite dark and mysterious to him in the shadows.

"If you don't want to take this any further," she said. "I will understand, but you should know that Beatrice is aching for Joshua,... here."

Joshua had no doubts, and Matthew? Matthew was aware then of the barren sexlessness of his life. The awkwardness of his estrangement and even the ethereal heights of his carnal meditations seemed pale by comparison with this moment, with this woman, this vision of all that was soft and female and mysterious,... and if it were just once in his life, he wanted to enter a woman, to feel every fibre of his masculinity come surging through his skin. He wanted to sink himself into the softness and the sex scented wetness that even as he thought about it she was now opening for him with a slow movement of her fingers.

He caught his breath, then swallowed to ease his dry throat. "Is that your night-dress, folded on the bed?"

"Yes."

"Would you,... would you wear it for me? It looks so lovely. I should dearly like to see you wearing it."

"Yes,... yes of course my love."

She crossed the room, and still he could not take his eyes from her. Even the little wobble of her bumpy thighs seemed lovely and luxurious to him and the dewdrops upon her mound had him giddy with the imagined silkiness of her sex. The night-dress covered her, but did not check the heat of the room, nor its scent. At first he could not define it, but then like something dimly remembered, he realised it was arousal,... his and hers, raw and dangerous and exciting. This was not about reaching the heights of esoteric awareness, not about holding back and riding waves of imagined energy, waves of mind altering delirium. This was about a basic human coupling in its most potent and natural form.

Joshua began to undress.

Beatrice peeled off her stockings and then lay back against the pillows of her bed, opening her legs and drawing up the hem of her night-dress. As she

watched him, she pulled the clip from her hair and let it fall. "Slowly, my love. Don't rush. We have all night."

When he was naked, she lifted the hem above her mound for him to see. There would be no foreplay. That was all done now,... and only one thing remained.

Coming to Beatrice was like coming to tenderness and softness and the feeling of being loved. It was like coming with a purpose that was preordained, and free of all the layers of sickly guilt. He did not have to ask if it was right, nor if she really wanted it, nor ask if he was a wretch for even daring to take pleasure in it. This was not a taking, nor even a giving, nor a granting of permission, it was an opening in time, a vortex that crackled and sparked and to which they both lent themselves, both feasting on the dark, sensual pleasure of it.

She received him with an ease that took his breath away, soft thighs rising around him, pulling him deep into the sex scented mystery.

"Don't hold back," she whispered. "Let it come from the depths of you."

It was perhaps not helpful that Matthew was reminded then of how Emily, at these moments had been apt to whisper "Take me, take me." But it brought to Joshua's mind at last the solution to the puzzle of what he felt that night. He did not take Beatrice, but in the consummation of their love, he completed her. She received him with a hunger that had been years in coming and when she lay back sighing of her satisfaction above the burning of his own loins, he witnessed a change in her expression and as she breathed out a long, last breath, as if dying of her love for him, he fancied that Amanda Fleetwood,...

...was no more.

## Chapter 13

### Parting at the tarn of dreams

I don't know how much more of this to tell, how much more will add to your understanding. Nor am I sure what images from that time still strike me as auspicious yet would, in their telling, serve only to confuse you further.

They lay together that night, Joshua's head upon her breast, his hair wet and pasted to his skull, the soft rhythms of her chest lulling him into velvet shades of darkness and sleep. His dream that night was of Beatrice and that room, of lying upon her, feeling the soft rise and fall of her beneath him, feeling the comfort of her night-dress against his cheek and the sweet femininity of all that she was. He heard the gentle rattling of the sash, and the kiss of a refreshing rain upon the glass, the two of them safe inside the old house riding out the night. All of this was observed with a vividness he understood to be no longer real but visionary and symbolic of something he would only come to realise in later life. Also he was aware of floating above the coupled lovers, observing them locked in embrace upon the bed. It was not him then who saw all of this,... not Joshua that is, but Matthew.

Matthew heard the clock downstairs striking three, then he counted the quarters until by four he knew he was awake and no longer resting against the comfort of Beatrice. He was alone, the sheets turned back and there was a cold hollow in the bed where she had been. There was also a banging in the house below, like the fall of a hammer on wood,... irregular and troubling.

So I got up and called her name. I was blind,.. no light at all, just the curtain of night and so dark I could not see my hand stretched out before me. I groped slowly, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

"Beatrice?"

I followed the banging sound downstairs and into the kitchen. The back door was wide open, swinging loose in the wind, crashing now and then into the wainscoting. I stepped outside, naked though I was, and I shivered in the night air. There was a little light from a sinking moon and it was no longer raining but there was a brisk wind stirring the trees, filling the night with disorientating sounds and strange moving shadows. I thought I saw a flash of white, some way off in the darkness and so made my way towards it. Then I found her, barefoot and knee-deep in the beck, in the little pool from where I'd plucked the quartz pebble that morning.

"Beatrice? Are you all right?"

I could not think what she was doing out there, and the sight of her like that frightened me. She did not answer and seemed to be in a daze, staring ahead, not seeing, not conscious. Then I saw her night-dress was snagged on a low branch. She was straining against it, not violently but patiently, as if not understanding what it was that held her back. I remembered then she'd told me how she sometimes sleepwalked and finally I realised what I was looking at,

not that it calmed my fears, for it suddenly seemed the most dangerous folly for her to be living out here alone and yet prey to such an unpredictable and unconscious habit. She might have fallen down the stairs, or wandered off into the night. She might have been killed!

I came down into the beck with her and slid my hand gently around her arm. She seemed to register a presence and I felt her compliance as I guided her around. I asked her softly: "Beatrice do you know me?"

She did not reply.

"Amanda? Is it you?"

Again there was no response. I freed her night-dress which was by now soaked and clinging to her legs, and I guided her out of the beck, and back towards the house.

"This way my love. The house is this way."

There was no resistance and I was struck by the way she moved. These were the lumbering, instinctive steps of a human shell operating on automatic - there was no personality. I saw then how clearly it was the psyche that filled us, that gave us grace and gentleness, that made us human. The body I guided back into the house that night was not Beatrice, nor was it Amanda, but a basic and unconscious mind, the mind of our prehistory.

I stripped her, peeling off the heavy wetness of her night-gown and gazed upon her softness. She seemed unharmed, unmarked except for a small cut to the sole of her foot which I stopped bleeding by pressing my finger over it.

"Your clothes are wet, my love," I explained, and she seemed to murmur her consent, then slid back into bed. Her head rolled heavily as if she were drugged. Her eyes were open and though she must have seen something in order to have avoided injury that night, she did not know me. I watched then, feeling strangely alone, as she snuggled back onto her pillow. And in the morning, she remembered none of it.

Dawn came gently, as did Joshua's realisation that Beatrice was on top of him, his sex swallowed by her own and she was riding him slowly into wakefulness. There came a moment of profound relief when he realised he was looking into her eyes, and that it was indeed Beatrice smiling down upon him. She had come back.

"Does Joshua love his Beatrice still?" she crooned.

He laid is hands gently upon the beautiful roundness of her waist, then swept them upwards to cup the pendulous weights of her bobbing breasts. He felt all the fertile urgency in this woman, and he smiled.

"Joshua has always loved his Beatrice," he said.

They did not leave her bedroom until the afternoon, but made sleepy love, then dozed and made love again as the feeling took them and, between-times,

they lay in each other's arms in a blissful, silent rapture. But come the afternoon and the swinging of the light past mature upon the window, they each sensed the fading of the day and for the first time they felt the coming of tomorrow. For tomorrow was to be their last day!

Joshua did not want to care about tomorrow, did not want to believe he would ever climb Drummaur Fell and forever leave this house, this valley and the woman who was surely his for all time now. Indeed the idea seemed perfectly ridiculous. Matthew's life meant nothing: Matthew's stupid wife, Matthew's stupid job, the whole mangled mess of it! He could easily have disappeared, hid himself from the world, here, shared this place with Beatrice, and Matthew would not have minded one bit. How could he? His life was empty! No, he did not want to think of her purpose, did not want to remember it,... but Matthew remembered it now and he alone sensed the magnitude of what was coming.

It began in the parlour late in the afternoon, when both were dressed and clean and restrained in their costumes once more, Beatrice in her corset and innumerable layers of cotton, and a sober suit of country tweed and he in his britches and his starched shirt. She pulled down the leaf of the writing desk and bade him sit beside her so she might show him her notebooks. They were written in soft pencil, page after page in a neatly flowing hand, yet entirely illegible, strange symbols, not Greek, not Cyrillic, not anything he could recognise.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Everything I am is a secret," she said. "A secret known only to this place. Now, I want to teach you how to read my secrets."

And Joshua, glad only not to be thinking of their parting thought the sharing of her secrets would forestall the end, reshape it in a way that included him somehow, and not push him a million miles away. He imagined himself passing weeks at Cragside, all Summer even, in the sunshine, among the fells with Beatrice and her notebooks, becoming party to her thoughts.

It was a simple code, she explained. Each letter of the alphabet was represented by a handful of symbols, graphic icons completed in no more than three or four simple strokes of the pencil, so it would flow easily like a normal script. These icons she said were ideograms of things that came to mind when she thought of Cragside and its environs. That way she had no difficulty in remembering what icon stood for which letter. The letter "a" for example, she said with a wicked smile, called to mind the ardour of lovemaking, which she drew as an erect and much simplified phallus. She said the letter "a" also brought to mind an acorn which she represented as a simple cup with an ellipse nestled in it,... and so on through the whole alphabet. And Joshua absorbed all of this with ease for he had borrowed the receptive mind of a computer programmer and after an hour or so, she had only to call out a letter and he could draw down at once all its icons.

There were special icons for the single letter words "I" and "a", as in "I am" and "A fish" They had their own unique symbols and were not to be used anywhere else in the text, for they might give clues to certain words and then the entire code could be unravelled by anyone with an eye for a puzzle. She was also wary of the simple two letter words such as "it" and "if". These she disguised by adding other icons that meant nothing,... nulls she called them. It perhaps sounds very complicated, but once one came to grips with it, it made sense, and the writing of even lengthy prose Joshua found to be remarkably easy,... prose that none but the two of them would understand.

Matthew saw now that all of this was leading up to their parting. She was teaching him the language of their future love, a love apart and as incomprehensible in its meanings as the script they were to use in expressing it. He saw all of this, but said nothing, as he had said nothing of his fears about leaving her alone with her sleepwalking habit. All of that was for another time. This time, these last hours were for Beatrice and Joshua, and Matthew did not want to intrude upon them.

In the evening, as she made dinner, he heard her weeping and Matthew's heart cried out for her. He went to her then, but the look in his eye betrayed the gist of the words he was about to say. He was going to tell her to stop this now, that they could find another way, a way to keep Beatrice alive and complete, but without the pain of their parting. She read it and he noted that she did give it a moment of thought before pulling away, vegetable knife in hand. "I'm all right," she said. "It's just the onions, that's all. Though it was sweet of you to be concerned."

He pretended not to know what she was talking about, pretended indifference. "Tomorrow is our last full day, then," he said. "How can one weekend change a man's life so much?" These words were ambiguous and might easily have been spoken by either Joshua or Matthew, though it was Matthew who spoke them.

"Is your life really changed so much?"

"From the moment I saw you."

"And for how long after tomorrow, then?"

"For always, Beatrice."

Matthew wanted to give her that other option. He would gladly have included her in his life, for there was a place for such as she, he thought. He did not understand the precise details of how they might have managed it, but he would willingly have pretended to be Joshua for ever if it meant he could go on seeing her, go on experiencing the wonder of her. Nor did he want her to think he would be relieved to put her behind him having had his way with her,... that even after only a couple of days, he always wanted to be with her. But how could he say any of this without deliberately crossing her strange purpose?

She read his confusion and his guilt. "No need to be glum, Joshua," she said. "We still have another full day."

No, she was saying. My mind is made up. This is the way it will be for us.

I left the house for a moment, slipped out to the beck and sat by the clear pool as neither Joshua nor Matthew, but as the slightly less tarnished soul that Ghita had begun to excavate from the mud of a confused mind. There, I tried to think it all through, but of course that was a mistake for sometimes the only solution to emotional dilemmas is not to think about them at all. The time was not about Matthew Rowan and he had to accept that. His path had come within the orbit of Amanda Fleetwood for a definite purpose, and that purpose was the creation of Beatrice. Wanting to stay with her now was a result of desire, wanting to tell her he would stay if she wanted him to was about guilt,... emotions whichever way they were described.

And emotions, says Ghita, are like the wind that disturb the calm surface of a lake, breaking up the perfect reflection of our true self, an untroubled and supremely contented self we glimpse only indirectly through the beauty of the land reflected in the waters of the lake. And such calm can only be attained by letting go of emotion. By letting go of everything. There is no emotion, no desire, no ambition that will ever deliver joy, for all these things do is disturb the surface of the lake and prevent our ever attaining what it is we think we are chasing. The path to joy, she says, requires an understanding of such things, and also an acceptance that our path does not always coincide with a direction of our own choosing.

Matthew knew he had to go, and somehow drag Joshua with him. He had to grant Beatrice this one last act of completion, this birth of heartache and loneliness and longing. Anything else would have been to interfere with something he did not understand. And he did not understand it then any more than he would in the later years of his own loneliness, but I am pleased he did at least possess the wisdom and the strength to do the right thing.

For Beatrice.

They slept together that night already like experienced lovers, like a man and wife of many years. All the extraordinary energy had been unleashed for one night, and only one night, a thing to be grasped once in a searing flash of profound experience and then reflected upon for the rest of their lives. They made a gentler love that night, and held each other, snuggled close, forehead to forehead, buried deep in the layers of her bed. And once again there came the gentle rattling of the sash and the softly striking chimes of the old clock below. The time of their being was over now. It was no longer an anticipation, but in many ways, for both Joshua and Matthew, already a memory.

Then it was Monday. Bank Holiday, I suppose, but not realised by me at the time, not for weeks afterwards, that beyond the granite and the magnetite cocoon of our valley there would be motorcycles roaring up and down like demented dragons, bent on self destruction - and great coach-loads of tourists

lumbering over the narrow pass of Blackstone, long glittering trails of overheating vehicles in their shimmering wake.

No.

All of it was lost to me, as indeed was even the ordinariness of the contemporary world. I ran on Cragside time now, was completely absorbed by it, little suspecting that my eventual return would cause a shock that I was never to fully recover from.

But in Drummaurdale, the peace of that Monday was complete, and the weather was a slice of joy from a clear blue heaven. So long as I can remember that day, I told myself, it shall always exist somewhere in time, and might be visited again whenever I have transcended the mystery that ties me to this world. Somewhere in time then, Beatrice and I are sitting out at a table beneath a glorious weeping willow in the garden at Cragside, and we are drinking tea from her fine china things. It is an exercise in precision, in perfection, the order of it and the prettiness - from the pattern on the cups to the glitter of the silver spoons in the sunlight, then the balancing of the cups on our laps as we breathe the scent of the fells, and slowly sip our tea.

I look at her, in her tweed and her white blouse with the clasp at her throat and the straw bonnet, and the smiling eyes and I pray it might be so for ever. It was then, and for that one time only that Beatrice brought up the subject of Matthew Rowan.

"I was thinking, Joshua," she said. "You know how much I want us to stay in touch, but I don't know where to address your letters."

"I have a friend," said Joshua. "His name is Matthew. Before I leave I'll give you his address. He'll see to it that we stay in touch."

She leaned over, full of grace and poise and she pressed her hand to mine. I felt a shiver for I knew she was not showing affection to her lover now - the touch was subtly different. It was to me, to Matthew. "I shall always be grateful to Matthew," she said. "More grateful than he will ever know, I think."

Matthew smiled politely and sipped at his tea, knowing that nothing in his life would ever be so perfect as the time he'd spent with this odd woman, even though a part of him could not help thinking he was only witnessing the last glimmer of a passing sanity. "I'm sure Matthew would have liked to have known you, Beatrice," he said.

"We have always known each other, I'm sure," she said. "But in the noise of the world, it's sometimes easy to forget."

She looked up at the fells then. "Isn't this the most perfect place? It seems too much sometimes,... too much for one human heart. So much beauty, Joshua!"

Time was slipping away now. One more night. One more night in this place, my cheek pressed warm and sticky against her bosom - and the sound of her

heart, the sound of the sash bumping gently, and the clock marking out its idiosyncratic quarters.

Then it was Tuesday and my heart could not believe the cruelty of it as I swapped my tweeds for the Tactel nylons of the late twentieth century. It was an evil day, cold and drizzling rain with a dense clag drifting like a sinister creature, obscuring the fell-tops. I was trembling on the doorstep of that dear old house, filled with dread, trying to fasten up my boots, and longing for a miracle, for some miraculous avenue to open and lead through to a life with Beatrice. But she was dressed and ready for the fell, with a heavy cape and a stick, ready to do battle with it, ready to deliver me back into the world through the portal of Drummaur Tarn.

I had set the watch from the old clock one last time, and promised her I would keep it running, that I would always keep it in good repair, keep it with me. She had said it was unimportant, but I felt it might one day bring me back to her. It was my only tangible link with the place, and for me, then, the only link with that time, with that memory.

"You don't need to come with me," I said. "It's a terrible day. I don't like to think of you coming back on your own."

"I know the hills, Joshua," she assured me. "I can find my way."

So we set off together and I took my last look at the place before we wound our way up the little path into the heart of Drummaurdale. At about a thousand feet the mist carried us up into its own strange, shifting world, and she seemed a spectral figure. She picked out the faint branch in the path that led up Drummaur Fell, and I followed, her image burning into my mind, so that I have never been able to walk the hills in any kind of mist without imagining, at any second, she might come striding out of the grey in her cape and her tweeds.

The sky almost touched the waters of the tarn that morning, rendering them a deep grey. It was not a lovely setting any more, but cold and damp, the fells completely obscured and I could not believe we had arrived already. It was surely a morning we had to linger over, but the fells seemed to be urging us to hurry, to get it over with.

"My God, Beatrice. It's so desolate. I can't leave you here like this!"

"It's nothing to be afraid of, my love."

"But I don't want to remember it like this."

"Then don't. Remember it like that first night, when you came back to me. Remember the moon, and the way we both knew everything was happening the way it was meant to be."

"You mean as it's happening now?"

"I will miss you, Joshua."

"Let me come back. Let me be with you. Let us be in love!"

She looked away. There were tears then, and when I saw them, I wept too and she embraced me urgently. So rarely do we remember the feel of an embrace, perhaps only the ones in parting, like lovers separated by wars, last embraces,... surely they are the ones that come to mind, the ones we carry with us, always. The softness of her, the warmth, the scent of lavender mingling with the wild perfume of that terrible desolation,... there was no danger of my returning, for surely I could not have faced it again, like the scene of a terrible accident, the memory would forever keep my footsteps turned away.

"Write to me?"

"Yes,..."

She looked down and bit her lip. "And you will keep your promise?"

You will *not* come, she was saying. You will *not* come back to me. Leave me, let me bleed. I love a secret part of you with all my heart but if I see your face again, it will be the end of Beatrice, the end of love.

"I promise, " I said, half dismissive, not daring to let the words linger in case they burned, and also trusting in fate that perhaps there would be a way back to her, one day - that our first letters would reveal the path, and I would see her again after all.

"Goodbye then, my love," she said.

There was one last embrace and a kiss whose softness lingers still, then I turned from her and walked away, walked back into my life, shaken beyond telling, and hating the world all the more for its banality, hating the first vehicles I saw, lumbering down the pass, hating my own car for its alien feel and its decrepitude, hating anything and everything that did not include the mystery of Beatrice.

Except Ghita,...

I had to find Ghita!

* * * * *

## Book 3

### The Book of Imaginings

***There is only one admirable form of imagination: the imagination that is so intense that it creates a new reality, that it makes things happen.***

***Sean O'Faolain***

***Irish Author***

***1900 - 1991***

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## Chapter 14

### Constable Ellen McBride

Fleeing from Drummaur tarn, time melts. It folds and merges, and Beatrice is already dead. Cragside is all but made over in my name, and I am haunted by an inexplicable presence, by flesh and blood that walks and smells and speaks as Beatrice, a presence that seems only half awake to the fact of what or who she has become. Then, as on that previous occasion, I come down to my vehicle with only one thing on my mind: Ghita! There is an urgency, a dire need to see, to confide, to curl myself up in the presence and the sandalwood scent of Ghita!

Of course ten years on, things are a little different in the manifest world. I can see as I descend the fell, half running, half falling that the Seven Sister's campsite is no more: Log cabins sit in pseudo isolation and the court of the Lizard man is now a concrete construction clad with stone to disguise its fakeness. My vehicle is different too, still rather old, but at least now I think I will be able to telephone using the mobile technology of the day, and not have to stand in the little windswept box at the summit of Blackstone, in the mist and the pouring rain.

But I'm running ahead now, too far, too fast, when there are other, more important matters to discuss, matters of fate, matters of the inexplicable way it twists and turns.

I had not even reached my car when I noticed another pulled up behind it, a brutal looking Landrover, bedecked with lamps and bull-bars - itself no longer young, it appeared mud-splattered and work-weary. There was also a man sitting rather cheekily on the bonnet of my car. It was a baggy pair of jeans, baggy leather jacket and dark sunglasses kind of man,... except on closer inspection it proved not to be a man at all, but Ellen McBride.

Her presence at that moment, after my experience on the fell was unwelcome and even a little insulting, but she *was* there and as tiresome as it was, I would have to deal with her now. I paused a moment in my approach, leaning on my walking pole, as if weary, and thus bought myself a few moments to readjust, to slip once more into the particular mode of dealing with her that I'd learned last night.

She did not fit in this story at all, you see? She was an anomaly in those early days of our acquaintance: too rough, too tough, too glaringly unfeminine and modern! Yet there she was, and all I could think was that since hers was the first face I'd seen since descending the fell, then her presence was crucial to my narrative in a way that was still hidden.

"Please leave me alone," I said.

She ignored me and wiped her hands across her face - a guarded gesture perhaps: contemplative, things to hide, not altogether sincere. "She's not who you think, you know?"

"I'm sorry? Who?"

"Lamarr telephoned, reporting your break in at the house. Curious that, don't you think? Curious too you didn't mention it to me last night when we spoke. So I'm wondering, does Matthew Rowan believe that because a person dresses up in someone else's clothes, it makes them one and the same?"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"It wasn't Amanda. She's dead. You have to accept that."

"What would you know about it? I don't wish to discuss this with you. And Lamarr had no business reporting anything. Cragside is not his responsibility any more."

"The house isn't yours yet. And Lamarr was right to report it."

"Look, whoever it is, did not break in. They let themselves in - and not to rob, but to live. You don't know what you're dealing with. Not you, not Lamarr, not me, not anyone, but she's to be left alone. This has to be allowed to work itself out."

She looked so completely masculine that I found her presence utterly repellent: her balance, her demeanour, her attitude of maleness - her legs wide apart so that I half expected to see the bulge of a male sex. But then she lowered her sunglasses and I saw her eyes. They were green - a most startling shade - and I was amazed I had not noticed them last night. She knitted her brows together and seemed for a moment almost to be concerned for me.

"Lamarr said you hadn't reacted to the news as one might have expected. Now I know what he meant."

"I don't expect you to understand."

"Then explain it to me."

"There's not a word I could say,..."

"Stop treating me like an idiot. Buy me a drink, and talk to me."

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm off duty. It's no problem. I'll follow you up to the Blackstone. You know the Inn?"

"That's not possible just now,... I need to call someone. I'm not feeling very well. I need to go home."

"Did you know your rear offside tyre is worn below the legal limit?"

"No it isn't,... all the tyres are nearly new."

"If you don't want a fine, and points on you licence, you'll buy me a drink."

"You're insane! You said you were off duty."

"I'm never completely off duty, sir."

The "sir" was the policeman's "sir", that special "sir", practised before a mirror in some induction college - a "sir" with a razor blade in it.

"Then fine me. There's no point in us talking."

"As you wish."

The Blackstone Inn was standing room only, with a couple of coaches on a mystery tour from Wigan. So she ordered us two strong mugs of tea and we sat outside on benches in the shadow of the Blackstone Screes - a grey, sawtoothed ridge rising about a thousand feet above us that seemed to gather the mist up into great armfuls. She had not fined me for my tyre which I still insist was in good order, but I have always been a coward in the face of authority - no matter how corrupt, and I had been afraid that if I'd not gone with her, she would have written me a ticket. Or perhaps I had allowed myself to be bullied into going with her, because secretly I had also wished it. As I gazed at her, searching for some chink of an opening in her otherwise inscrutable exterior, I felt that if there was such a thing as a norm for normality, then she was as far away from it as any of us, and that was about the only thing we had in common.

"What did you mean?" she asked. "Last night, when you said we were in this together?"

"Forget what I said last night. I'm just a stupid, eccentric, middle aged man, who blathers on and on about things that have no meaning. I'd had a bad day, that's all. I wasn't rational. Anyway, how did you know I'd be here?"

"You said you were going up to the tarn. There are only a few places to leave a car. I just ran the registrations until I found you. Are you sure that motor of yours is safe to drive?"

"It has a valid MOT."

She smirked as if to say that didn't mean much. "I'm sure I could find something if I went over it."

I tossed my keys across the table at her. "Go on, take a look. Do your worst."

She looked away while pushing the keys back towards me. "Don't be an arse. I was only having you on."

"Then you have a very twisted sense of humour."

"I'm twisted all right," she mused. "What else would I be doing in a place like this?"

A long curl of mist snaked down from the summit of the Blackstone as clouds scraped overhead, and the light changed from one of harsh contrasts to a soft, transparent mistiness. "You can look out there and say that? For pity's sake, woman, this is one of the most impressive places in the British Isles."

"Don't go all mystical on me. It's bleak and it's empty. It reminds me of the Highlands."

"Empty of what?"

"Of everything. There's nothing here. It's just scenery. This place is for tourists who don't crave much in the way of excitement. You've no idea what it's like having to live around here. Do you know how difficult it is even trying to get a decent haircut?"

"You look out there and you feel nothing?"

"Only revulsion."

"You're a city girl,... no offence,... you're used to decent shops and a take-away on every corner."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing,... if you can live with all that,... falseness."

"Is that why I can't understand you? Because I'm a city girl? Because I'm false?"

"Such things,... the way we live in cities,... they're corrupting. They blind us to what's real. But we should drop this,... please. I can't fight with you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Same thing. Why fight? It's pointless and it's stupid. And we really have nothing to say to one another."

"You fought Planer yesterday."

"No. I denied him something - that's different."

"From where I was standing it looked like you were giving him two fingers. And well done, I thought. If ever a man could make me wet my knickers it would be him,.. some of the stories I've heard about Planer!"

"You're not making me feel any better, Ms McBride. I reacted instinctively. Planer was a bad smell,... stale and sickly. I did not want him contaminating the scent of Beatrice."

She did not ridicule this sentiment, which surprised me. "And the scent of Beatrice was what?" she asked. "Sweeter? Healthier, I suppose? Lovelier? It's okay, I'm not completely void of romance."

"She was lavender,..."

"Lavender?" she nodded. "Yes, her bedroom did have a scent of lavender, as I recall. My grandmother was lavender too,... sure,... that's a fine scent - clean and pure,... a purifying scent. And me? What's my smell, Mr. Rowan?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"What? Can't you smell me from over there? Should I come closer, perhaps?"

"It's rose,... I had an aunt who liked to bathe in rose petals. She was as mad as a March Hare, but very sweet and kind. That's your scent."

Curious, she sniffed her wrist. "Leather I would have said."

"No, that's just a cloak you throw around yourself, and yes it's leather, very male, very Yang. Underneath though: your blouse, your underwear, your skin,... that's rose,... very feminine,... very Yin. You are a paradox, Ms. McBride. I'm sorry, but you asked."

The news seemed to disturb her. "Rose? Are you mad? I've never worn anything rosy in my life."

"You don't wear it. You secrete it through your pores. Scrub as much as you like but your scent is your scent and you have no choice in it. You are a woman. No shame in that."

"You're a very strange man, you know?"

"I have a particularly acute sense of smell, that's all."

"I didn't mean that. Just look at you! You sit there looking like something out of a Dickens novel with your little spectacles and your tweed jacket and your waistcoat with your pocket watch - and a tie for goodness sake! Who wears a tie these days? And on the fells! You even talk like someone from the last century! You're how old? Forty five, forty six? Well, trust me you'd pass for sixty if you had a touch more grey. I mean, look at that guy over there. He's fifty if he's a day but he dresses half his age and looks a good ten years younger than you."

"Then both he and I are guilty of misrepresenting ourselves - either that or we are simply dressing in the way that makes us feel the most comfortable. Personally, I've never been a jeans and tee-shirt man, even as a teenager. Tee shirts always make me feel vulnerable, you know, exposing the hollow your throat like that?"

"You're having me on! No, please don't answer. I've heard enough. You're not married I take it."

"As a matter of a fact I am, but no longer cohabiting, shall we say. And why? Because she couldn't bear me looking like this? No. I'm simply being myself, and if that makes me look like an old man, then so be it. I have no desire to make myself attractive to women, no desire to attract a mate,... I don't even know why we're having this conversation!"

"All right, all right. I'm sorry, I always go too far. But I'm really curious about what you said last night. I've been thinking about it."

"Forget it. I was tired, upset. It had been a long day. There is nothing for you to think upon. "

"You were suggesting something."

"No."

"You *were*. Tell me what you meant."

"I don't know what I meant. I don't know what anything means. I just,... "

"Go on. "

"I sense that something very odd is happening, an event, a breaking through of unusual potency. I have to position myself in order to deal with it. It's a purely spiritual matter, and very personal. It has nothing to do with Mr. Planer's looming terrorist-led Armageddon. It may be something entirely inside my own head and concerns no one else, or it may be that it will effect the world and those around me. "

She regarded me with more patience than perhaps I deserved. "So far so good. But where do I fit in? "

"I asked for guidance,.. and you appeared."

"Asked for guidance? From whom?"

"Oh,.. please,.. you wouldn't understand. Just leave it alone."

"From *whom*, Mr. Rowan?"

"Tell me: Imagine you are thinking of someone you haven't seen for ages, then the telephone rings; you answer and it's them. What do you think? A meaningful coincidence, or meaningless?"

"I don't know. I don't recall it ever happening."

"But if it did?"

"Meaningless of course."

"Then there's nothing else I can say that would make any sense to you."

"You can be really insulting, you know?"

"I didn't mean it in an insulting way. I'm merely being pragmatic."

"Just because I don't believe in something doesn't mean I'm not capable of listening to an explanation of it. Are you afraid I'll just mock you?"

"Naturally, I'd find that tiresome."

"You're saying you prayed? And I was the answer to that prayer?"

"It was not exactly a prayer - not the kind we were taught as children, the hands together Our Father and Amen sort of prayer. It was more of an inner surrender."

"Surrender to what?"

"I don't know. It's a mystery. Well there we are. Sometimes we delude ourselves, don't we?"

She looked at me for a long while perhaps trying to see if I was merely teasing her. "I didn't take you for a religious man, Mr. Rowan."

I was a Mr. now? Curious, I thought. No barbs, no cynical dryness,... just a

plain and respectful "Mr.". Such Yin softness did not fit the neatly stereotypical image I had already constructed of her.

"I didn't say I was religious. I said it was a spiritual matter. There is a world of difference."

"Aye,... fair enough." She pulled up the collar of her blouse and sniffed her skin beneath it. "You really think I smell of roses?"

I was not in the mood for explaining anything, but it was not from fear of ridicule, although I suspected she was perfectly capable of that. I simply did not understand what purpose it would serve. But of the rules pertaining to such encounters, I suspected I was already in danger of breaching several, for though it was unwise to volunteer too much, it was equally unwise to steer a path that was altogether evasive. If she really had a role to play, then I needed to be a little more open, inviting the common ground between us to reveal itself.

She smiled then, a startling thing because I had not seen her smile before. She peeled back her lips, revealing a set of perfect white teeth. But her smile was not altogether sympathetic. "You're a New Age hippy then?" she said. "It's just that from here you look more like a wee tweed Englishman. You look like you work in a book shop."

"Actually, I do work in a book shop."

"All that Yin and Yang stuff - is that really still something people think about?"

"As far as I'm aware, yes. They've been thinking in terms of Yin and Yang for thousands of years. I see no reason for them to stop now. Whether I continue to believe in it is my own business."

She looked away, distracted. "You don't do drugs, I hope?"

"Mescaline went out in the seventies. Anyone who still does drugs is only interested in the drugs."

"Good,... good." she drummed her fingers on the bench-top. "Because drugs are very bad, you know? Under any circumstances."

She could be preachy, I thought - this was the policewoman in her. Could it be she was not entirely corrupt then? Could there still be a part of her that recalled a desire to protect and serve, rather than merely to control? These were feminine virtues, but an authoritative, preachy ego must be male, it must be masculine to make way in an authoritative, preachy world. And such a world is inevitably a cold and brittle place, a place untempered by the intuitions that are by their nature female. And ego holds the inner world at bay for fear of drowning, for fear of madness. But there comes a stage when the inner world *will* break through, and ego must assimilate it, accept it, be changed by it or be overwhelmed. I had faced such a paradox, long ago, delayed it somehow, but it was returning now and I saw a metaphor of it

reflected in Ellen McBride. She was a woman who had been a man for long time, though not so long that she had forgotten now and then how to look like a woman - I remembered the soft lace and the black dress she had worn last night. But there was a world of difference between looking like a woman and feeling like one.

"Of course drugs are bad," I said. "But there are other hallucinogens, quite legal and without the damaging side effects."

"I don't know of any."

"They cannot be said to exist in your world. And they are not drugs so much as,... techniques."

"So how does one begin?"

"Begin?"

"To tune in,... as they say. Become,... spiritual, mystical? Please, I'm serious."

"No you're not. You're inviting the softer side of me to reveal itself, so you can drive a nail through it."

"All your sides are soft, Mr. Rowan. I could have nailed you pretty well by now if I'd wanted to, don't you think? Why else would I be talking to you? I *am* interested. So please, how does one begin?"

She *was* looking for a way back! "There are any number of ways, but your question alone, that's probably the beginning."

"And dare I ask exactly what the point of it is? You talk of spiritual awareness,.. but what does it feel like to be aware? And aware of what, exactly?"

"I can't explain it. It can only be experienced."

"You're not such a good advertisement though, I mean you don't look like the happiest of men. Perhaps you should think of giving it up and just getting yourself a girlfriend."

I laughed. There was a side to her that had a very impish sense of humour and it was this side that began to endear her to me because she made me laugh at myself. "To be honest I've not thought about these things for a long time. I used to think of nothing else, but then something happened that caused me to reject it. It always comes back though, and I'm at the stage of wondering whether I can risk going on rejecting it."

"Risk? Where is the risk?"

"Once you accept certain truths, there is a danger that in rejecting them later on, you will go insane. And then there's a danger that in accepting them without question, you will still go insane. Either way, it is a dangerous path.

"The danger is that people think it will make them happy, but they don't know what happiness is. Or they think it will make them suddenly very wise, but

people don't really know what wisdom is either."

"So,... what is it about then? "

"Put simply, I suppose it's about the negation of desire, any kind of desire. In time that brings stillness, it brings a sense of oneness. In reality we might be up to our eyes in shit, but it's a question of not minding, and in not minding, we don't notice it so much, and so in a way the fact we're up to our eyes in shit is an illusion, not so much the fact - which is more a question of perception, but the minding. You see?"

"No, I don't see it at all. You'll be telling me next I need to become one with this mug of tea."

"Sometimes it feels that way. There are moments, especially out here - for example I look up there and see the screes with the mist tumbling down, but I also *feel* it as well, or I might have done once, except I've really not possessed that kind of stillness for a long time."

"You would need to find a teacher, I suppose?"

"Not always. Some travellers have teachers who come to them as disembodied spirits. Don't look at me like that - one must also have an open mind, and remember that we're talking about an inner, psychic reality, not the tangible reality of our workaday lives. Children have imaginary friends sometimes, don't they? These are patterns of imaginative energy. In another language they become personal spirits. As adults, most of us simply lose the ability to conjure them up - we begin to feel stupid, so we reject our inner spirits. Only rarely do some people manage to hold onto them. But that way isn't for everyone.

"Then, some travellers simply read books, some teach themselves to meditate, others follow the language of their dreams, some use the Book of Changes as their teacher. And yes, some follow the advice of a more experienced person. But we are all introduced to the teacher that is right for us by chance - it would be unwise to trust any other method, unwise for example to go out looking for a teacher. You have to trust in fate, and trust your senses to tell you when something isn't right. You, your own life, your own personality dictate the road that is right for you. The best a teacher can do is help to point that road out for you."

She appeared to be listening and as I spoke I became aware first of her eyes drinking me in, such beautiful eyes, and then I heard myself speaking which not always a good sign, but in this instance I realised I actually believed what I was saying, that I was answering a lot of the doubts and the questions I'd put to myself in recent years, things I had wanted Ghita to reaffirm.

"Go on,..."

"You don't really want to hear all of this, Constable McBride."

"I'm still sitting here aren't I? Still sharing a mug of tea with the wee tweed

Englishman, and not over there swapping bawdy stories with the geezer in the gut-enhancing tee shirt?"

The curl of mist had been a precursor, harbinger of the cloud that now swept in, and whose base scraped a thousand feet. Since the Blackstone lay at fifteen hundred, we became suddenly aware of a worsening in visibility, and a sharp drop in temperature.

"It's getting cold, " I said. "We shouldn't be sitting out here."

"We could go down into Ambleside, find a hotel. The change would do me good. I'm sharing a police house with a couple of girls barely out of their teens at the moment and they're getting on my nerves. All they talk about are men and clothes and Coronation Street. We could talk there, spend the night together."

"Are you mad?"

"No, just horny."

"You don't want to make love to me, my dear."

"My dear? Cut it out! There isn't that much difference in our ages. And who said anything about making love. I just want to fuck. When all you need is to get pissed, you're not always bothered about what's in the bottle are you?"

I think I grimaced, as if scalded by her coarseness. Mixed in with the maleness and the impish humour, there was also something very dangerous about Ellen McBride,... something it would have been easy to be drawn in by, even to desire in a simplistic way. But she was not for loving, I thought, at least not by a man like me.

"I know," she said. "You don't like dirty words much do you, Mr. Rowan?"

"No, I don't like them."

"It's all right, I was only provoking you. Actually, I'm beginning to think I might prefer women, these days."

My head was beginning to spin. There seemed to be so many facets to her, and she presented me with a different one every time she opened her mouth.

"I see."

"No you don't. You're just being polite. It's not that I've ever been with a woman. I wouldn't know what to say, or even how to find one that might like me in that way - but I think I just,... prefer them. It's something that's begun to haunt me."

"Recently, you mean?"

"Yes. It's all right - it doesn't mean anything." And then I saw the flicker in her eyes,... the need in her.

It's a common mistake, according to Ghita, that after having travelled a certain

way along our path, we begin to assume all encounters are meant to be for our personal benefit, that those coming to us are somehow always wiser or possess at least one gem of wisdom that we need to further our own understanding. But we forget that through our own experience we become a magnet for others seeking their own truths. Once we set off down that road, we all become teachers. Those who are not serene, seek those who are, and so it dawned on me that our roles might not be quite as I expected.

This woman was hurting. She was a lioness, thrashing in pain at the thorn driven through her heart, and it occurred to me that in passing, she hoped I would pull the thorn out.

"Ellen,... what is it you want from me exactly?"

"Be my friend," she said. "Oh, I know what you're thinking. You'd have to be mad to stay near me for an hour, let alone want to keep on being near me. I have that effect on people. It's just that there's no one I can talk to."

"Well,... you hardly invite intimacy. And you can't simply demand friendship from people. They have to warm to you first. These are things we learn in the playground."

She laughed. "I remember my playground days. I was always the one no one would talk to, the one they all instinctively felt they had to avoid - even the bullies. So it seemed natural for me to become a policewoman - except it was the same with my colleagues,... I always ended up doing the jobs they reserved for misanthropes - like now for instance, patrolling these little roads. What? You're shaking your head. You don't believe me?"

"There's more to you than that. You've been damaged,... something bad, something traumatic. You've lost your way, lost your direction,... that's all. You say you're confused - your,.. em,.. sexuality,... I can see that too - I mean you're a very good looking woman under all that leather, but you dress like a man."

She gave a shrug. "Maybe," she said. "And maybe when someone comes along and talks about something bringing us together, you can forgive my curiosity." she dropped her head into her hands for a moment and I could see how difficult this was becoming for her. "Help me," she said. "Like you helped Beatrice."

"What do you know about me and Beatrice?"

"More than you think."

"I doubt it."

"I'm not so stupid as I look. I read your letters."

"How can you have read them? Only Beatrice and I could decipher them."

"That's what you think. It was a good code,... not easy to break - quite devious,... but I've always had a way with these things. It was me who found

her, Mr. Rowan. Me who traced her back to Cragside, me who sat down with those letters and worked the whole thing out. Why didn't I tell Planer all of this? Because it was none of his damned business. My sergeant sent copies up the chain of command, not realising I'd already worked them out. No one thought to ask me,.. so I didn't tell them. I was the reject from Glasgow you see, the one who'd been exiled on account of her,...."

"You read our letters?"

"Things looked strange to me, something not quite right, so I sat down and worked them out. I know all about Beatrice and Joshua. When I understood what I was reading, well, your letters made me cry. I've never come across anything like it."

"Then last night at the Ash Tree? That wasn't a coincidence at all! It was contrived!"

She looked away. "All right,... all right. Yes. I was there to engineer a meeting between us, but it went wrong. Me and my poison tongue!"

"Why didn't you just ask to see me? Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Because I'm an idiot and I'm telling you now, all right?"

I was mortified. "You read every letter?"

"Don't be embarrassed. Any man who could do that for a woman, well,.. he's nothing to be ashamed of."

"You think I did it out of pity for her? That I was somehow humouring Amanda?"

"Don't be a fool. You couldn't have kept that up for as long as you did. That's what I want to understand. My God there were hundreds of letters, and so intimate."

"Understand this: Beatrice was a *real* person. I did not know Amanda. And when I wrote as Joshua, I *was* Joshua. Ours were voices out of time. We were instruments of something greater than ourselves, seeking knowledge of itself, through us. That's all I know, and it isn't over yet. Things are still unfolding."

She gave a smile, a soft smile, like the reflection of something inside of her that was not hopelessly ruined. I had misjudged her. She'd read the letters, and kept their secret. She had borne witness to them. "I really ought to lock you up, you know? " she said. "I mean talking like this. Have you a history of mental illness?"

"If you think I'm mad, then why are you here? Your beer-bellied man is still there and from the looks he's been casting in this direction he clearly fancies his chances with one of us."

"Teach me, Matthew. Please."

It was Matthew now? "Teach you what? What is it you want for yourself,

Ellen?"

She tugged desperately at the lapels of her jacket. "I don't like the smell of leather," she said. "What I want is to see if I can smell of roses again. I want to escape inside my head like,... like she did - be someone else."

"If you're worried you might be Lesbian, I can't make you straight. And anyway there's no problem with such things these days,.. surely,.."

"I'm not worried about that! I just want to feel,... like a woman,... and if that woman happens to like other women then so be it, but I have to find the woman in me first."

I should have been with Ghita, pouring all of this out, sitting in her room of jade and silk, but instead I was sitting at a bird crapped picnic bench in the chill mist of the Blackstone, clutching a mug of cold tea and quite unable to move on account of what was unfolding before my eyes.

"How did you come to find Beatrice? She lived such a lonely life there. She would never have been missed by anyone - except me,... and I was so far away, our letters sometimes weeks, sometimes months apart."

"It was chance, that's all. I walk in the mountains. It's the only thing that keeps me sane: hard, physical exercise. I'd not been over those fells before - they always seemed insignificant to me - remote but not high enough to warrant much interest."

"What drew you to the tarn? It's a way off the track for a peak-bagger."

"The light caught it, that's all. I was feeling morose, I wanted somewhere to sit for an hour, somewhere to brood and lament my failures, you know?"

"She was at the tarn. Waiting for you to find her!"

"Well, in a manner of speaking. We've already established that, I think."

"Ellen, I'm not sure I have anything to teach you, but what knowledge I have is yours if you're patient enough to coax it out of me - but really I get the feeling we're here for the same purpose. We are both seeking Beatrice."

"Beatrice is dead, Matthew." She shook her head and looked away as if tired of repeating the obvious. *Beatrice is dead, Matthew. Dead!*

"No. *Amanda* is dead. Beatrice is alive."

She was intrigued enough to look at me once more. "But the woman you saw was not Beatrice either."

"Maybe not. I don't know who that was - maybe another soul seeking Beatrice, seeking her enough to want to *be* her. These feelings for other women - did they begin before, or after you were drawn to the Tarn of Dreams."

"You're crazy. I shouldn't be listening to you."

"I take that to mean it was after, then."

"So what if it was? Where's the significance in that?"

The mist grew thicker, and the air still cooler. Beads of moisture began to condense on our cups and drip down. We became isolated, two figures alone. The inn vanished, its lights winking out, and all sound became deadened, so that the cars creeping along the pass and the people returning to the car-park retreated into another world.

"What you want,... from me: it requires trust, Ellen."

"And you don't trust me?"

"You frighten me. You're the sort of woman who'd have me thrown in prison on some trumped up charge if things ever went sour between us."

"You have the wrong idea. I'm not really like that - well, not with everyone."

"Perhaps that's just something I have to learn to deal with, then."

She nodded, eyes cast down, close to tears now, so that my heart was unexpectedly stirred and I found myself wanting to comfort her. Could it be she was afraid!

"You'll teach me. You'll be my friend?"

"We shouldn't define things any more than we need to. Teacher? Friend? We have too many labels for things. All we need to do at this point is say we'll talk again, and soon."

"In the meantime, I just go back to being what I am? Are you brushing me off, Mr. Rowan?"

"No. Listen, go down into Ambleside and find yourself that hotel. Find yourself some privacy, some quiet. Lock the door and take off everything you're wearing,... your clothes, jewellery, makeup,... everything, do you understand? Sit down in the dark, in front of a mirror, with just a candle between you and your reflection. Then think back over your life. Think about who you are and who you once were. Think about your childhood. Think about the road that brought you to this table, here in the mist with a man like,... well, like me. Hold nothing back. Hide nothing from yourself. Sit there until it hurts inside, sit there until you think you can't bear the sight of yourself any longer."

"That's it?"

"The thought makes you uncomfortable?"

"I can't bear the sight of myself as it is. I don't need to sit in front of a mirror to prove it."

"Why? Are you too thin? Too fat? Too bony? Too muscular? Are your breasts too small? Too big, perhaps? Do you have wrinkled skin? Bumpy thighs? A sagging bottom? Look in that mirror, Ms. McBride and strip away all the

labels you've ever given yourself, and all the labels others have stuck upon you: the lifestyle magazines, the fashionistas, the celebrity chatterers, the lovers, the friends, the enemies,... the people who have loved you, the people who have insulted you. Take them all off, one by one and when all you can see looking back at you is a woman looking at herself, then we can talk again."

"All right. I will. Do you enjoy my compliance? Does it thrill you?"

"Thrill me? Explain?"

"I mean sexually, of course."

"You are a difficult woman, Ms McBride. Now please leave me alone."

"But we will talk again?"

"Yes. I've promised."

She extended her hand, which confused me, and I looked at it for a while, hanging there under my gaze.

"Shake on it," she said.

So we shook hands, and her grip was soft - a woman's grip, I thought, a woman dressed like a man, perhaps trying to see if she preferred being a woman who liked men, or a man who preferred women.

When she had gone, slipped away into the mist, I lifted my fingers to my nose and breathed her in, searched her scent for the meaning of her. And with some surprise I realised I had been correct: the scent of her was as heady and as mysterious as a rose, a rose locked inside a shell of the hardest crystal. But it was not other women she sought in order to find her way back to herself. It was one woman in particular. She sought Beatrice. And in that one thing, we were the same.

## Chapter 15

### O'Doire's Bookshop

Is it cowardice not to act, when you know you are unable? I should not have listened to Amanda. I should not have played her game, but thrown in my marriage and somehow made her my lover. Do you think I had not thought about it? But you should also know there is something in a man that will make him cling to his marriage, even when he knows it for the deceit it is, and even when he has the promise of something real, something honest laid before him for the taking. And my excuse was Aaron; I could not have done it to Aaron, could not have abandoned him! Why had I not been able to see that my marriage was fated to fail, and I would lose Aaron anyway?

Meanwhile, I had grown too old for writing computer games. I had begun to view the childish genres of the business with deepening dismay. There were games older people could play, I'd thought, games to suit ageing spirits such as my own, but the business, like much of the world, was entirely youth-centred, seeking only basic thrills from simulations of speed and killing. Also, as graphics improved, the top shelves of the games emporiums had discovered that simulations of sex were also popular. Even in fantasy, ego sought only ever more exaggerated versions of itself. It made no difference that we had done all this before, all be it with grainer graphics, twenty years ago - it was the market that dictated our direction, and not the other way around. And it was children who bought computer games, not middle aged men, I was told.

Anyway, I had just turned forty when the firm negotiated a merger with a large American outfit who had been impressed by the sales of our last blood-soaked frag-fest. We had high hopes of investment and access to US markets, but instead we were immediately shaken down, and I found myself shaken out. The offices were moved from a crude but functional unit off Bridge Street, to a glass and concrete edifice in the Keyes, but only minor officials and marketing men sit upon its swivel-chairs now, pin-striped ferrymen through the portal to the UK market. The more mundane programming of course, like any other task that relies upon human skill, charged in man-hours, was done in China.

It was fate then that brought me to O'Doire's bookshop. I had been a customer of this odd establishment for many years: a dim, dingy place, the likes of which should no longer have been in business,... yet it was, though barely, and in steep decline. It was my habit to spend my Saturday afternoons there, looking for historical works, turn of the century stuff on current affairs, fashion, technology, agriculture, anything, trying to piece together a background context for the long distance love affair between Joshua and Beatrice.

O'Doire was a genuine tweed Englishman with a waistcoat, a bow tie, a grey pallor and a forty smokes a day habit that was sure to see him off before he was seventy. His business was strictly second hand titles, displayed in

idiosyncratic order, in a labyrinthine arrangement of shelves throughout the three floors of his little shop off Albert Street. Atop all of this there was also a small attic room for rare "antiquarian" and other "specialised" titles. Admission to the attic was by appointment, and to only a handful of discerning collectors. So far as I could work out, O'Doire got by selling a small number of extremely rare titles, books that didn't even touch the shelves and came from private collections, or the bankrupt stock of other bookshops. News of these lucrative disposals was a mysterious business and relied on being well connected - such was O'Doire's world - old fashioned, indeed so far as I could tell, unchanged in centuries.

The week before my premature retirement from the computer games industry, I had been chatting with him about the Internet and had suggested that all he needed was to list the bulk of his second hand stock on a website. There were sites that enabled similar establishments to become linked and to enable their combined stocks to be searched for specific titles. In this way, he would open himself up to the international market, and perhaps shift a few more of his less exclusive titles than he was used to doing. I had thought that the entire second hand book market had been transformed by such technology, but somehow it had passed O'Doire by, and he did not seem overly concerned by it.

He had replied that while it sounded like a good idea, he had neither the time nor the patience to go through his stock, even if he had known how to use a computer, which he did not. And he had joked in parting, that, given my knowledge of such things I should give him a ring if I ever fancied a change of career.

O'Doire paid very little of course, but then I knew next to nothing about second hand books, so it seemed fair. It was one thing to catalogue them, but quite another to know how much each title was worth on the open market - why for example a torn first edition of a certain title could be worth hundreds of pounds while a first edition of a different title in pristine condition could not even be given away.

"It was," said O'Doire, "not always a question of merit, but merely whatever someone was willing to pay, and that the one was not necessarily an indication of the other."

It was clear one had to have been born into the business in order to make any sense of it. My future with the book trade was therefore not long-term.

Now, O'Doire had a daughter, Min, a twenty five year old Goth with pale skin and red hair. She was unmarried, and presided over the specialised titles of the attic club, which I later discovered were of an entirely erotic nature. On my first day among the dimly lit labyrinths of shelves I had discovered the secret door to her domain, and climbed the stairs to a small study where I'd found her sitting, elf like, examining a garishly illustrated work on the art of body piercing. It was a rare title, she explained, from a print run of no more than a hundred, and by a photographer who was apparently well known for that sort

of thing.

Though somewhat embarrassed, I feigned polite interest, saying I was given to understand the pain of undergoing such stapling and riveting was a key element of its enjoyment. Min concurred and went on to explain the number and location of her own personal expressions of the art form. All were restricted to parts of her anatomy that were unlikely ever to be seen by her father. It was strange, I thought: the man kept the finest collection of erotica in Manchester, and his own sexual tastes reputedly went into all manner of areas I had no wish to acquaint myself with, but flesh is different to blood and Min knew he would probably have had a heart attack if he'd known about the studs in her labia,... the same studs she had little hesitation in offering to show me.

For all her shocking forwardness and imagined kinkiness, Min was a very pleasant young woman, very sweet-natured and possessed of delicate mannerisms that I found most endearing. But even though Emily had taken off by then, sucked Aaron out through the fabric of my reality with her, and I was a free man, so to speak, I was not prepared for Min. What with Ghita and the tantric practices, I was not sure how I could have coped with the demands of an ordinary, energetic lover, one also a good deal younger than me and who conformed to the mysterious and darkly sinister Goth credo, so I did the only thing I could think of in order to prevent her interest becoming an unsettling dynamic: I began to dress like her father.

This worked like a charm. Min and I became friends, and she did not invite me to see her piercings again. Also, to my surprise I felt myself very much at home in O'Doire's costume and realised of course that the tweed Englishman is a socially acceptable compromise between the clothing of an Edwardian gentleman and the contemporary gut-enhancing teeshirt worn with ripped jeans. The wearing of a waistcoat of course led to the proper wearing of the pocket-watch Beatrice had given me, its chain on full display, instead of hiding the whole thing surreptitiously in my trouser pocket. I finally came out, so to speak, as the middle aged eccentric I have perhaps been all my life - and incredibly, no one seemed to mind. Long gone it seemed were the days when people would point fingers and call me rude names.

Min was curious about the watch, and had noted early on that it was never accurate.

"You should get it fixed," she'd said.

"It runs perfectly well."

"But it's never the right time."

"On the contrary, Min,... this is the correct time. It's your watch that's wrong."

"And the clock over there?"

"That too."

O'Doire I found to be rather a different man as an employer to the one I'd been

used to buying books from. Now I was no longer a customer, I discovered him to be rude and overbearing. As a case in point I once asked his advice on the value of a recently acquired title, to which he replied to the effect of: how the hell did he know, and what was he paying me for if I had to keep bothering him all the time? So I'd made an honest stab at the value, that had later turned out to be disastrously low, losing O'Doire a hundred pounds in the process. That had resulted in half hearted threat of dismissal but after a deep breath I'd told him I was unused to such treatment, that I'd once worked for five times the salary he was paying me and for a good deal less abuse. At which he'd smiled, apologised and told me to take no notice of him whatsoever. He was a grumpy and irascible old man - these were personal traits and though they sometimes boiled up to the surface, in truth he meant no harm by them. It was in fact evidence of his trust, that you would not take offence when he snapped out his personal frustrations on you.

It took about a year to catalogue sufficient titles online for it to begin having any effect on the business. I knew nothing about this side of things and was only generally aware of an increased number of sales from the titles I was having to retrieve from their resting places and then dispatch in Jiffy-bags to all corners of the globe. The first I knew of it I was invited to accompany O'Doire and Min to a celebratory lunch at the Adelphi, and there it was announced I would find an extra tenner in my wages. I had promised not to spend it all at once and we had laughed about that, for there was never any secret that as soon as I found myself another job = one that paid a decent professional salary - I'd be quitting the bookshop.

But the years passed and highly paid computer jobs became quite scarce, skilled jobs of any nature for the over-forties in particular were more or less obsolete. So, for all my training and former earning power, I sank into the low wage economy, counted my blessings, and penned my letters to Beatrice in the quieter trading hours of O'Doire's antiquarian bookshop.

By now of course, I had become absorbed by the place, become a part of the family of O'Doire and Min. But I could not get over the feeling that their purpose had already been served, that they had granted me an easy transition from the high-salaried world, convinced me that a catastrophic drop in earnings does not herald immanent starvation, nor feelings of worthlessness. Indeed my time at O'Doires had proved infinitely more rewarding than I had expected, and my friendship with Min had introduced me to a whole new sphere of outrageous eccentricity that made my own seem quite tame.

Does a fictional character have life and meaning beyond the pages of a book? This was a topic she first broached after loaning me a much thumbed and curiously stained paperback bearing the fairly unambiguous title of: "A Gothic Maiden in Chains", then insisted we discuss the story when I'd read it.

The tale consisted of the heroine of the title, who submitted herself to all manner of painful and humiliating sexual abuse at the hands of a grubby little character for whom the author would have us believe the heroine would

willingly have laid down her life. Now, so far as I could tell, the difference between erotica and pornography comes down to the use of language. Erotica does not use the unpleasant words of teenage vocabulary, but possesses a kind of beauty in its prose that intrigued me. Pornography has always seemed like the back door reaction of a society taught to repress its sexuality, and the result is always an ugly caricature of what should have been a more openly expressed rite.

Min's erotica, I felt, took a slightly more intelligent view, but I had long ago grown weary of the rational western attitude towards sexual matters.

Did the book excite me? she wanted to know.

"Yes,... yes it did."

"Why? Because it was a naughty book?"

"Partly, perhaps. But I found myself actually involved with the characters and that added more depth to the experience."

"You felt the characters were realistic? You felt their actions were authentic?"

"Yes,... quite so. I found her treatment to be very cruel, but I can easily imagine human beings doing such things to one another."

"That's because the book was a description of a particular pattern of imaginative energy," she said, in all earnestness. "An energy that exists in its own right, an energy the author has declared herself witness to through her words. It existed already as a pattern, 'out there', you see, a pattern of charged eroticism, of pure energy. Do you know what I mean?"

"Em,... possibly. Could you explain that to me again?"

Min had read literature at university, and had no doubt perplexed her professors with this particular thesis. Eroticism was a form of energy, she was saying, its effects immediately felt by most human beings, but it was an idea one could easily transfer to works of a more conservative nature.

"Such as Noddy and Big Ears?" I'd suggested, far from convinced.

"Why not?" she'd replied, ignoring my sarcasm. "They're popular characters. They've persisted in time. As patterns of energy, they're pretty much established in the fabric of human consciousness. They're part of the tapestry of humanity, but their purpose is not so profound as,..."

"As the Gothic Maiden in Chains?"

"Did her sufferings not disturb you? Did they not make you ask questions of her motivation? Of yourself?"

"I suppose they did. But if I'd been her father I'd have given her a good thrashing if I'd found out what she was up to."

She smiled and raised her eyebrows in mock approval. "That's very interesting Matthew. Now there's a curious fantasy we might indulge in."

"I think you're twisting what I said."

"Not at all. I feel a synchronistic connection there. Ever since you've taken to dressing like my father, I've tried to find a way of relating to you on an erotic level. And there you provide the answer yourself."

"Please, Min, there are certain thoughts we should perhaps keep to ourselves. What were you saying about the 'Gothic Maiden in Chains'?"

She sighed. "The Gothic Maiden will be returned to until all those questions have been answered, either by you or by others. That is the purpose of her existence, the purpose of her suffering. Could you not imagine being cruel to me? Would you not like to punish me, for being a naughty girl?"

She was an incongruous figure, potent and sexy, seated in a ruby leather chair in classically designed study with a big mahogany desk, a brass lamp, and walls lined with books. And she *was* occasionally a very naughty girl. Among the books I noted the Kama Sutra and other Hindu and Taoist titles on the Tantra,... but I did not share my knowledge of these with Min. For me, through the practices, Ghita had become the mistress of a sexuality whose aim was to touch pure light, while Min seemed the mistress of a sexuality whose aim was darkness,... not necessarily in an evil or an unhealthy way, but in a way that provided a curious balancing dynamic to my own secret activities.

"If you were the maiden in chains Min, I would want to release you, rescue you,... marry you off to a nice man with a good salary and a BMW, see to it you had a couple of kids and lived in a nice semi on a nice development in a Cheshire suburb, and made love in a straightforward manner that did not involve whips and chains, no more than twice a week."

"But that would be like death to her, Mat. That would crush her. She lives to serve and be punished. The more she's hurt, physically and mentally, the more she is in love with her torturer."

"I know. She'd rather be beaten by that odious little man than spoken to in a tender way."

"You hate him, don't you? Why is that?"

"Because he's all the things I hope I'm not. He holds the woman prisoner and I hate her too that she could love him. I mean,... could you love a man who did that to you?"

"The right man, yes. To serve, to submit,... why not? So long as the game was understood by both parties, and its rules respected."

"It seems dangerous to me. Yin receives Yang, but is never subordinate to it."

"If Yin is fertile to what Yang is offering, then it's only natural she should take what she needs, Mathew."

Put that way, her views seemed almost rational, but docile Yin was more likely to be annihilated by rampant Yang, by Yang that did not know when to

stop.

"Still, it worries me. Although your beliefs seem to have rendered you quite serene."

"Yours too Matthew,..."

"I cannot hurt you, Min."

"I know that,... but still, now I have my private fantasy."

I have come to the conclusion that there is no definitive reality between people at all. Min and I played a game when we were together, a game I enjoyed and one that endeared me towards her in a very tender way. I was not the same with others as I was with Min. She changed something in me, as I changed something in her. Such a mutual dynamic, when enjoyed held together friends, or lovers and when loathed, formed enemies.

I was thinking about this when I walked to the book-shop that first morning after leaving Ellen McBride in the mist of the Blackstone. I had not loathed the dynamic of our jousting, and indeed I'd found her awakening parts of me that had long been dormant - a certain combative spirit, and a spark for life. But these things were poorly understood then, and the business of Cragside had already unbalanced me.

I felt it suddenly, when I turned a corner and noticed a young woman bending down, trying to place a large box into the boot of her car. She was wearing hip-cut jeans, a style that seems fiendishly designed to slide down at the slightest excuse, to expose buttocks and underwear, which in this particular case consisted of a delicate pink thong, plain cotton and soft-looking, very sweet, very Yin. The effect on me was dramatic and the image haunted me for ages afterwards, so that even as I sat at my little desk in the book-shop, I was still thinking about it, and shaking inwardly. It was ridiculous, I thought. The girl had been in her teens and I was a man in my forties, choking on a feeling of inexplicable and quite overwhelming desire.

It came to me that Min was right of course: the erotic is a door to a fundamental energy. One did not always need the fancy ritual of spiritual sex to touch the light. It was everywhere - every time a human being looked at another and felt desire.

I closed my eyes for a moment and let down my thoughts, drew the tingling hardness from my sex into my lower body and, by degrees, raised the feeling up my spine into my head. The ache subsided, and I was left with the dizziness of it, swirling. I let it be for a moment, then pushed it down the front of myself, into the centre of my soul, felt myself sinking there, and becoming gradually steadier.

Min noticed I looked strange and brought some tea.

"Bad weekend, Matthew?"

"Tell me, Min. If you were nineteen and I was forty five, would you find my

lust for you arousing or pathetic?"

"Pathetic, I'm afraid, but then I'm not nineteen. Why? What's the matter?"

"Perhaps your little room upstairs has finally corrupted me, but I've just glimpsed a girl's knickers and for a moment I couldn't think straight."

"You poor man!"

"I'm all right now. But I think this is important somehow."

"I take it you weren't with anyone at the weekend? A secret lover perhaps?"

"No."

"More's the pity, or you wouldn't be feeling like this. You're a magnet for energy, Matthew. You're like a woman, very Yin as you're fond of saying. You just open your legs and soak it up all the time. But you should be a man now and then,... and shove it out. How long is it since you got laid?"

"Min! Please,... that's not the issue here."

"Six months?"

"Eh? Oh,... much longer. Four years,... maybe five."

She cupped her hands over her mouth in horror. "My God! My poor, sweet man!"

She took my arm at once and made to pull me from my seat, motioning as she did so with her eyes towards the stairs. "Come up to the study. There's a whole half hour before we need to open."

"Min!"

"All the time we've known each other, you've never had a woman?"

"I suppose that's right, at least not in the way you're thinking. But we can't."

"Why not? It's nothing,... it means nothing. I'm seeing someone anyway, but if a friend can't do this for you, then what else can she do?"

"I'll be all right. Trust me. I feel much better - really. You know me Min. You know I'm fond of you. If we made love, I'd take it far too seriously, and end up spoiling things between us. So, no thank you,.. but it's very sweet of you all the same."

I did not tell her I had come into property. I did not tell her I was now counting down my last days in the bookshop, that I was being drawn away by things beyond my control. I did not tell her, that the only warm thing in my life these days was her.

The memory of the girl with the box continued to haunt me, but equally, as the day passed, I felt the energy of that unexpected encounter coursing through my veins, like a serum. I had forgotten that a man could feed off his passing desires in that way,... divert them from the frustration of his

advancing years, and channel them instead into something enormously powerful. But such energy could also destroy him, if he did not direct it wisely.

## Chapter 16

## Ghita

Church halls possess a peculiar smell. I have not been in one that did not smell exactly like all the others,... something damp, and dusty and neglected. Nor have I been in one that did not possess the same dull acoustics, rendering voices flat and cracking in my ears - voices from the past,... the Arkala's of cub-scout days, the bawling headmistresses, the dry croaking of the old, powdered, Sunday School maids, and the titter of ladies struggling with the various Asanas of Hatha Yoga.

Strange then, Ghita's voice could sound so pure, so soft, a voice seemingly not intended to carry far, calm tones that ought to have died, drowned out in the wobbly ripples of background pollution. But her voice cut clean through, like a whisper carried far in a bowl of mountains. Crystal. Poised. Clear.

She had thrown open the doors of the hall to let the heat of that summer's evening out, so I was able to sit in the corridor for the last five minutes of her class. There, I watched her from over a sea of meditating heads, all still, all lost to their inner worlds, as was she, seated in the Lotus, hands resting lightly in her lap, palms upturned and overlapping, thumbs touching, head tilted forwards,... eyes closed.

She wore a jade leotard and white tights, a jade headband holding back her shoulder-length hair which was longer than I remembered, though as black and shiny as always. She was forty now, and perfect,... the only transcendent being I have ever known. She was holding a long breath. I counted two minutes before she released it, and then she felt something, felt me she said, and her eyes, two great white orbs, opened, already focused on me.

"Thank you ladies," she said.

Then she was lost as pink and yellow and blue and green bodies of all shapes and sizes rose from their positions. The church hall resounded flat to their sudden chatter and the thudding of their footsteps on bare boards. It took another five minutes for my view to be restored, but she was still there,... indeed she literally had not moved a muscle, so that she was still looking at me,.... only now she smiled.

How can I explain, other than to say Ghita is not of this world? That's the only way I can describe her extraordinary calm and her beauty. The epicentre of this overwhelming presence resides in her eyes which radiate infinite compassion and harmony, eyes that had only to look upon you in order to include you, as she included me now.

Still she did not move.

It had been five years. A long time. I felt her reading me, and she glowed with

compassion, then gestured with one upturned palm for me to approach. It was a formal granting of permission. Rules applied you see? We had been close once, and I could easily unbalance her if I was not sincere, if I was too casual, too needy, as she could have destroyed me had she become human and embraced me out of love and pity.

I took off my shoes and socks, left them in the corridor, then came to her slowly, feeling the heat of her presence ever stronger as I drew nearer. Then I knelt before her, closed my eyes and lowered my forehead to the boards. It was strange, but I thought of Min, submissive in a leather corset and nothing else, awaiting punishment at the hands of her lord and master. It was not quite the same thing, and punishment was not a word Ghita would have understood, but if this woman had asked me to die for her, I would have done it - so powerful, so dangerous, so ill advised, is the business of spiritual adoration.

It was not for me now to make a move. I had presented myself, and it was for Ghita to make her wishes known. Was I to leave or be accepted back into her confidence? I felt the boards move, felt her kneel beside me, felt her hand upon the top of my head. Then I smelled sandalwood, and jasmine, but did not dare breathe too deeply of them in case she took it as a violation. I could do nothing yet, nothing until she had spoken.

"Look at me," she said, then took my wrists and turned my palms upwards and outwards, to the ceiling, to heaven. "The Changes kept you well?"

"I'm lost, Ghita. They have brought me back to you."

She placed her fingers on my forehead. "I sense a fear in you, Matthew."

I did not reply. I was aware of footsteps shuffling by in the corridor, past the open door. They paused and a voice called out: "Everything all right, Ghita, love?"

I did not look. It was a dry old dear, twin-set and pearls, my fussy aunt Geraldine, my busy body mother. Busy body voices intruding, blustering, badgering. I wanted them to leave me alone, leave me to my strange thoughts, thoughts they would have considered insane, obscene, ungodly.

Ghita eyed this interloper with perfect poise. "Everything is all right. I will see you next week, I hope."

Her presence encircled me and my awareness of all else ceased. All I saw, all I felt was her. Her fingers drew a circle on my temple, then she cupped my chin in her palm.

"Tell me your fears."

"I'm afraid of making a mistake, afraid of misunderstanding omens, afraid of acting against fate, instead of acting as fate's instrument."

"Ah,... grave indeed! "

She seemed to sag. She let my chin drop so that my head drooped towards

her, as her own head drooped and our foreheads met, touched lightly and then settled together. I closed my eyes again as the light of my adoration took me.

"How you have grown!" she whispered.

"No, I've gone backwards. I know less now than when you first began to teach me. I know nothing, less than nothing!"

I felt her hand curl around the back of my neck, a light pressure, drawing me down, drawing my cheek to her breast. The softness, the tenderness, the sweet sympathy was too much and I began to weep. I was no longer a man, but an infant in the presence of a divine motherhood.

"Two things strike me, Matthew. First, it is good that you claim to know nothing, for the Matthew I used to know spent every waking hour devouring knowledge, even though I told him wisdom came not from knowledge, but from forgetting everything. Also, you no longer seem to possess the courage of your delusions."

"But without understanding or genuine insight to replace them, losing one's delusions is like dissolving into an infinite void,... the dissolving of my self."

"Can you still trust in the unknown, Matthew?"

"I think I can, but I fear my weakness, that I will not live up to what is expected of me."

Her fingers began to comb my hair, sweeping, reading, probing,...

"What is it, my love? Tell me, what has happened."

"Beatrice is dead, but lives on somehow. I don't know what this means! Something quite mysterious is coming to the surface and I don't know what it wants from me."

She was stroking me now, holding me close and rocking me. I felt lost to her. Had she advised me to let go, to forget, then I would have forgotten. Had she advised me to go and seek Min, to whip her bottom until it bled, then I would have done so! Had she advised me to send Ellen McBride to hell with her best wishes, then I would have done so. But she said none of these things, though I'm sure my mind was an open book to her. Instead she asked me to come home, which I did without question. And so it was that after five years, I returned to The Retreat.

## Chapter 17

## The Retreat

There is a chapter of The Changes that speaks of contemplation, of climbing a tall tower, or a mountain and gazing down upon the land, of gazing upon the roads that have brought us to where we are. Sometimes when struggling through the day to day business of our lives, the roads we have taken are obscured by the noise of our surroundings. Thus our lives might seem no more than a series of disjointed happenings, but from the serenity of one's tower, the road takes on the appearance of a coherent thread linking the happenings of our past like beads upon a necklace. Also, by waiting in stillness, we invite the insight that might reveal the road we can best take from here.

The Retreat does not sit upon a mountain, nor does it possess a tower but nestles deep inside a forest, and is not an easy place to find. My description of its location, as of Cragside's, will be necessarily vague and I shall say only that it is a former manor house and farm, a former military training centre for saboteurs, and more recently a former new-age commune. The retreat sits like a kernel of the Self, surrounded by the unconsciousness of the forest, and only in this way does it tower above the noise of the world, revealing things to those who undertake a journey to its core, as I did, once, and was about to do again.

Vehicles do not pass beyond what is called The Gateway. This is a small farmhouse and outbuildings on the periphery of the forest. Here, they are driven undercover in order to conceal their clutter and so preserve the lonely, unfrequented and uninteresting aspect of the location. The way to the retreat then continues on foot, through a curtain of forest. This secrecy is like a veil, hiding it from the public eye and from the newspaper men ever hungry for news of things that do not conform to their salacious preconceptions of normality. To the newspaper men what goes on here would be meat and drink,... sex and scandalous exploitation of vulnerable minds, of the credulous, a cult, a septic sore in the heart of the British countryside.

So it is kept secret.

The secrecy is not complete of course and no doubt there have been government informants passing through from time to time, infiltrating the genuine travellers, as they will with any organised group. I am to assume then, that the retreat has been deemed harmless by them, I suppose, if only by virtue of its continued existence for the past half century.

It has to be said that in the sixties they experimented with drugs here,... Mescaline, L.S.D, Magic Mushrooms, and other potent naturally occurring hallucinogens, that I'm told still grow in the surrounding forest. These

techniques were employed by many, following in the footsteps of Huxley in order to pry open the doors of perception by force. But it was found that drugs did not open the way to mass enlightenment as it had been hoped, only to more drugs and various states of depression and neurosis from which not everyone was able to return. Nowadays, they teach a gentler path here, a path that requires only sufficient silence for the voices of one's own unconscious to be heard, a path that dissolves Ego into a sea of tranquillity.

I feel I should underline that The Retreat is not the headquarters of a religious cult. There is no money involved, no life membership locking one in, no signing over of one's personal fortune to a charismatic elite in exchange for dubious wisdom. Indeed the only secret taught here is that the answers we often seek lie not in the acquisition of a single piece of profound knowledge, but in assigning no value to knowledge at all, that only by letting go of the world can we ever hope to understand and therefore transcend it. This was a lesson I was particularly slow to learn. In the eyes of God all of us are equal, those for whom the acquisition of any knowledge is always a challenge, and those whose command of knowledge has earned them prestigious roles in society. Yet all are equally capable of grasping the truth.

It is an innate ability.

Like breathing.

Anyway, there were few travellers at The Retreat that night. I counted two handsome, bronzed Australian youths who'd backpacked in, finding their way by word of mouth among fellow travellers who'd passed this way before them. They listened to Ghita in the flame licked darkness of the assembly hall, blue eyes flickering, their blonde hair aglow as they sat, entranced while she spoke about the language of our dreams. They were sincere and deeply earnest, but too young to make much headway with the problem. It was for them, I think, the experience of beings such as Ghita that fate had led them here.

There was also an elderly lady, Dorothea, slender and grey and lovely. I could not guess her age, but she had been in excess of seventy the last time I'd met her and she had expressed to me then her belief she had come only to die amid tranquillity,... but she seemed stronger now, more upright, more fluid in her movements, less haunted somehow, and it was even said that Ghita had recently found her a partner for the practices.

Then there was Khan, the quiet caretaker. He was the one without whose administrations The Retreat could not have existed at all, and so might have been called its leader and chief organiser, but he was always to be seen on the periphery, listening as intently as any serious student. He was a rotund gentleman from the far east, very wise, very learned, and very kind. Some said he was a monk, obliged to leave his homeland for being too outspoken,... too political. Like Ghita, he had an air of calm serenity, and took it upon himself to maintain The Retreat as a place worthy of its name, a place for others to seek, while being himself, it seemed too worldly to attain his own

peace.

I should say I have never been fond of attending group meetings. I had experienced hug-ins before meeting Ghita and found them universally excruciating. Listening to her was always a pleasure, but even here the gathering always ended with discussion and the sharing of experiences, a thing my stalking ego hated and so I usually avoided them preferring instead to find a lonely seat in one of the many forest alcoves. Ghita knew all this, and still she had brought me here, when I had thought I might have spent the night alone with her.

"Matthew," she said, turning to me suddenly. "Will you tell us your dream? The dream of Beatrice?" Then to the others. "Matthew dreamed this dream ten years ago. It comes from the depths of his unconscious, from the shared layers of our experience, and so it is remembered by its numinous quality." Then again to me. "Tell us, Matthew. Tell us your dream."

So I related the story of my meeting with Beatrice and of my first night in her house, the dream of her coming to me, and the taking of her nourishment. Ghita knew the details of this dream well enough, for it had made a big impression on her at the time of its first telling. She knew it contained intimate details, details I would find embarrassing to repeat in front of strangers, and yet still she asked. And I gave myself over to her trust. My voice sounded lost in the cavernous hall; I was not sure even if the others could hear me, but I spoke whatever words came into my head, then expressed my confusion over the meaning of the dream. I also expressed my astonishment at the dream's vividness, and how I had finally been convinced by Beatrice that it had in fact been a dream. I left it there. It was the dream she had wanted - just the dream and not the whole tangled tale of Joshua and Beatrice.

Following my narration, there was only silence and I was afraid I had either bored the others or they had not understood a word. But in fact, they were only meditating upon the dream and it came to me this was the reason for Ghita's talk. She had set the combined psyches of all these travellers to work upon the meaning of my dream, to see if there was anything we had missed the first time, the time Beatrice herself had explained it to me.

It was Khan who challenged Beatrice's interpretation as being symbolic of nourishment.

"With respect, I beg to differ," he said. "It seems to me the presence of a dragon upon the breast is of great significance, I mean beyond that of mere decoration. This was shown to you for a reason - admittedly not in the dream, but in the events that immediately followed. Firstly, it was necessary to convince you that you had been dreaming and that Beatrice had not attempted to seduce you. Secondly, the symbol of the dragon, so startling to you, so unexpected, suggests to me the energy underlying the cosmos. It was not honey that issued from her breast, not the milk of spiritual nourishment, but the breath of the dragon that you took into yourself."

In eastern culture, the dragon does not carry the same symbolic meaning that it traditionally does in the west. In the west it is something to be feared, an evil to be overcome. In the story of St. George, it was the stealer of women. And if one sought access to the woman, sought to win her compliance, one had first to defeat the dragon. These were alchemical symbols, the woman being the guide through the dangerous landscape of a man's unconscious mind, the dragon being the dangerous foil of a man's ego, his suppressed shadow, a thing that threatens him at every turn. Defeating the dragon releases the woman, who might then guide the man to his proper end.

I thought I had recognised my own personal dragon years ago: the unwillingness to see any fault in myself, and my readiness to project my own weaknesses onto others instead of admitting them as my own. And the woman I had won by these efforts was not a lover, but another symbol, a secret visitor in my dreams, of whom I shall speak more, later. And all the wisdom of this secret spirit, this inner guide, I tended to project onto Ghita. The psychology was strictly western, and utterly convincing to me.

In the east however, the dragon is symbolic of the creative potential that flows through into the tangible world. Dragons flying through the skies in March or April, herald the returning energy that will renew the world, but in the cosmic sense, the dragon represents also the vital spark of heaven, the jolt of energy that gives form to things in its own image. It is the breath of heaven, like a wind, invisible, yet causing the movement of things in the manifest world.

Khan was right. We had not accounted for the dragon at all. And it was not my ego it represented, marked as it was upon a woman's breast!

"What does it mean, to consume the dragon's breath?" I asked.

Ghita seemed quite taken by the idea. "What comes into your head, Matthew?"

"Could it mean that I am fate's instrument? that I do the dragon's bidding?"

"Then it must be so," said Khan.

"The dream confirms your belief in your purpose as an instrument of whatever is unfolding in the Drummaur valley," said Ghita. "This is not a delusion. Your dream presages it."

Sitting among them that evening, and listening to all that strange talk, I thought of Lamarr. I imagined him among us, sitting cross legged and stiff, looking uncomfortable in his suit. I wondered what he would have thought of our language. He would have been polite, I supposed, head craned attentively, listening with that practised courtesy of his, but privately he would have thought us a very muddle headed bunch, talking in a language as sure and as coherent as a sly mountain mist.

Did it mean anything, this talk of dreams? Was it insightful to look upon the glimpse of a dragon-tattoo as an omen, as a calling card of fate? Or was it all meaningless? Was it words strung together by a people unable to grasp the

real world at all? A people rejected by it? A people in hiding, crouching here in this scrap of lonely forest? But then what did Lamarr's words mean? His language? His ordinance? Had they taught him the meaning of his own life? Had they granted him more insight, more understanding? And what was there to understand anyway, other than the basic truth that all answers of the kind we sought would be incomprehensible to us? In either language, ours or his, the best a man could ever hope to achieve in his lifetime was to become accepting of his own eventual death, rather than desperately trying to find ways of avoiding it.

I think I have always been alone. Even during the good years of my marriage to Emily I was alone with thoughts like these, thoughts that were not for sharing, as each of us that night were essentially alone, haunted by these same thoughts, and expressing them now in a language that was the opposite of rule, and more the language of suggestion, of shadow and mistiness.

This language of shadows would have me believe I was an instrument of a larger happening, that by acting in a certain way I could bring about a turn of events that was ultimately correct - not necessarily for me,... nor even for others, nor even the world, but more in a cosmic sense. I could view my actions from this perspective, or I could act simply because I felt like it. Either way life went on and things got done. It was all a question of motivation, and interpretation.

"Most beings are asleep," Ghita once told me. "They spend their whole lives oblivious to the things that have haunted us since birth. We have always been awake to this fact. We carry something over from a previous life, you and I, a feeling that we might have once come close to transcending the cycle of birth and death. We had thought ourselves complete perhaps,... but still we lacked something that truly completed us and enabled us to slip the bounds of earth."

I told her I was nothing, that I was just a confused man who'd suffered cycles of anxiety and depression all of his life. I told her that if she didn't hold me upright, I'd fall over. And therein, she said, perhaps lay my crucial flaw. It was as Min had also said: there was a time to be like a woman, and a time to be like a man,... to sense the rightness of the energy flowing through my fingertips, and to direct it where my instincts were pointing.

It was now midnight, and I had retired to a studio in the main house, a few rooms, plain white walls, simple furniture, clean and easy on the eye. There was a corner of the living room void of any detail, save for a few deep cushions scattered about and a low table with a plain candle. Many had been the nights I'd spent sitting before such a table, meditating while the candle burned down.

I had not meditated properly for five years now, but I was realising this was not because my beliefs had suddenly been overthrown, it had been more to do with anger and a desire to blame someone or something for what had happened to me. I had chosen to blame fate. I had chosen to condemn it as an

entity that was hostile towards me. And thus I realised, although I no longer gave it the time of day,...

I did still believe in it.

But how could fate be to blame for something I had always known was going to happen anyway? Was I not complicit in my own downfall, for even Beatrice had seen it coming all those years ago! I might have taken steps to prevent it, instead of just waiting for it to happen.

Emily? Truly, I had loved her, even as I had loved Beatrice. Emily had conceived Aaron at a time when her interest in me had been, shall we say, insignificant. But realising she was with child, she had come to me frequently of a sudden, and therefore in a way that had aroused only my suspicions. I had let her believe I did not suspect the child might be someone else's - that I'd known Aaron's father was probably the smart young man with the corporate Amex card, with whom she'd seemed to spend a lot of time away with on business. She had begun her seduction of me at a time that was just long enough for her to have known she was pregnant. And Aaron was born conveniently premature to preserve the illusion.

We did not speak of these things, and had she known I'd seen through her - she would not have stayed with me. And still, I had wanted to hold on to the sham of normality! Is that why I'd argued to keep the child, even knowing it was not my own? A child changes things you see? Its dependence on both of you for its most elementary needs holds you together, I'd thought, and so it had seemed to be for a while at least. My motives had not been so altruistic then! I had grown to love Aaron, but his coming into the world had been assured by my fear of losing Emily.

Damn it, why would Ghita not come? I wanted only to be alone with her! But Ghita knew this was the state I was in and so she could not come. If all I had wanted was a woman's breast and soft legs to lie between, then it would have to be another. However, one could not demand sympathy of a woman without explanation, without a description of your wounds. Some women might grant you their bodies without a murmur, but to demand sympathy and shelter is another matter entirely. So it was I no longer looked at women in this way, no longer desired them, as I had once desired them so very much, for in truth I had learned they do not possess what it is I truly seek.

*"How do I end this?"*

A woman cannot tell me. Not Min, not Emily, not Ellen McBride, not Beatrice, Not Amanda Fleetwood. And Ghita? No. She taught me that all she could do was introduce me to the voice within myself, the voice that knew the answer, and to teach me its language. A woman cannot end it, though a man like me invariably wastes his life, blinded by the belief that she can. A woman, a real woman, is mere biology and she speaks only to the biology of a man.

Words between us are useless.

## Chapter 18

## The Magical Perspective

Ghita is wrapped in a long coat to protect against the early morning chill while we take the forest trail.

"Tell me again about Joshua?" she says. "Why does he desert Beatrice?"

"Joshua wants to be with Beatrice," I tell her. "He writes endlessly of his love for her, writes endlessly of his desire, dreams of her softness, dreams of her scent."

"And Beatrice returns this love, this passion?"

"Yes, she expresses it in great detail, often in verse, speaking of Joshua's body in ways that make him blush. She begs him to return to her so they can be together, body and soul."

"How does Joshua know that she does not mean this?"

"She *does* mean it! She means it with all her heart."

"Then why can he not be with her?"

All the deeper conversations run this way with Ghita. Everything we say, every event we describe takes place in the present, in the *now*, for in her philosophy there is no other reality. Past and present are technical inventions, she tells me, that merely avoid confusion in our linear interpretation of life. But in the circular life, every event is now. I am born, now, as I am dying, as I am making love with Beatrice while the sash rattles in the breeze, while I am having this conversation with Ghita, or writing these lines.

All of it is now.

It is a fine, clear morning and I have the feeling it will be a hot day, only for now the shade of the forest keeps the air cool and fresh. I take a moment to steal a glimpse of Ghita's face. It is an heroic face, the face of a queen.

"Why does he not return to her?" she asks me once more. "What prevents him?"

"Amanda,... the creator. She forbids it. She knows how much Beatrice loves him, and she's counting on the pain of separation convincing Beatrice that the fantasy is real. Indeed, it is the suffering that brings Beatrice into sharper focus."

"So, in your correspondence, though you each speak of love, the presence standing between you is Amanda?"

"Yes. She's never mentioned of course, because she does not exist inside the game. We feel her presence like a goddess, like the controller of our fate. I

fear that if I defy Amanda, if I go back to Beatrice, it will be the end of her. Beatrice will not recognise me as Joshua - only Matthew. The spell will be broken and Matthew will see only Amanda dressed in old fashioned clothes. Amanda's eyes will narrow in hatred of him, for breaking his promise. So it goes on. We must not underestimate Amanda. She has a powerful intellect, and can weigh men up at a glance. I often wonder if she does not see in Matthew a man who would never do anything to upset the sham of his marriage."

"And how do you feel, about Joshua?"

"Matthew despises him for not allowing him the guts to go back and take the risk. He despises him because he knows it's true - a part of him would indeed rather stay with Emily, go on living the sham, than risk being with Amanda. And a more honest reality."

"You do not approve of Joshua?"

"He does things that Matthew would not. Yet he is loyal to Beatrice, loyal to their love which is far more real than anything left between Matthew and Emily. Joshua is not wrong. He is a noble figure in some ways, but his actions shame Matthew."

"And the woman who is impersonating Beatrice now? Tell me about her."

I am a long time in answering. I have thought about her every day, but there are no answers,... my rational senses are pulling one way and my instincts in the other.

"Matthew?"

"I do not see an impersonator. This woman *is* Beatrice. She is imagination given flesh and blood. She looks at me and she knows me,... knows that I am Joshua. But,..."

Ghita is intrigued. "Go on."

"She is a broken version of the Beatrice that was coming into being, through Amanda. Savage somehow,... primitive,... "

"It's possible to view these women as versions of your inner self, Matthew."

"You speak of Anima? But Anima is manifest only in dreams,... and she's not come near me in years. These women are real."

"Not only in dreams, my love. Remember, we are prone to projecting their image onto others. How did you feel, when you saw her?"

"Confused,... terrified,... I ran."

"You did not look at her and fall in love at once, as you have with other women?"

"No,... she was very beautiful, but haunted somehow. She was not Anima,.. she was,.. herself,... she was Beatrice."

"When we live life as we do, Matthew, we begin to view even waking reality with an eye for its symbols, as one would in a dream. The first Beatrice could not be sustained. You lost your way, lost your faith. But what was once begun will always come again, and will keep coming until you engage with it and see it through to its proper conclusion. This woman haunts you. She is the physical manifestation of that which is inside of you. Engage with her and you will engage with it. Remember her coming in the dream? How real, how potent that was?"

"Are you saying I killed Amanda when I lost my faith?"

"Think symbolically, Matthew. You lost your way, you blame Joshua, despise him,.. think about that. The dream was stillborn, and the first Beatrice returned beneath the dark waters of the lake of your unconscious - did you not tell me she was found by a lonely mountain tarn - what more potent symbol is there for the unconscious than that? But, remember, you cannot destroy a pattern of energy. She still exists, symbolically, though she appears weakened now."

"What am I supposed to do?"

She turns and takes my hands in hers. "You know I cannot tell you that. Only she who is inside of you can guide you. Engage with Beatrice, and you will awaken her."

"I know I will go back," I said. "Otherwise there seems no purpose in being given the house. I just don't feel ready for what I believe I must face. A part of me wants to keep to the rules Amanda set, to stay away, to let Beatrice go on pining away alone."

"I've thought of Amanda over the years," says Ghita. " Her rules were a powerful device, but now the creation continues outside of her mind. There is no longer a need for Beatrice to feel pain in order to survive. Listen, all things that might happen, have happened. Each life is a story with many endings, all played out simultaneously. There is a version of this story where Joshua is forever returning to Cragside but not arriving. You already know that version. But here you are presented with an alternative, a narrative in which Joshua *can* return, one in which he can be with Beatrice."

"Is this what you really believe, Ghita?"

"You believe it too."

"But it doesn't make any of it real."

"Matthew, you pretend to be obtuse. You pretend to cling to the old way of viewing life, to the rational view, where ego feels safe and dominant. But you do not really believe in it any more. You know it is just a mask you used to wear and have put it on afresh for the comfort it once gave you - before you knew it was just a mask. You ask my counsel? It is this: Take off your mask, and open your eyes once more, or you shall always be running from the meaning of your life." She strokes my arm and touches her forehead against mine. Her scent intoxicates me. "You know there's more to this world than

can be explained. You know I cannot explain it any more than you can. But we both know the way others see the world is only the simplest approximation of the way things really are. We are the same, you and I. To deny what we have seen is a deceit, and our souls will not stand for it. You are a pilgrim, Matthew, and the curse of the pilgrim is that he must open his eyes, or his soul will destroy him."

"I know."

"Then do it, for it would sadden me to lose you from this life."

"It would?" Her words inflate me, for I have always loved Ghita, and wanted her to love me. She does love me, of course, but not in the way the inferior part of me wants her to.

She smiles and glances away, only too aware of this weakness in me, and she is reluctant to play upon it: "What do we know about the unknown, about the cosmos, about God?"

"It is unknowable."

"And?"

"Any speculation upon the nature of it is pointless and limiting."

"Good. And what of God's will, of fate, of Tao?"

"Unknowable, indescribable."

"And?"

"Fate is never hostile. If we can have faith in it, we can share in its protection. If we lose our faith, we lose its protection and invite misfortune."

"Good. The mask is peeling away now. Keep going."

We walk a little further, into a small clearing where the grass is covered with a white mist that rises to our knees, and the sun cuts through clear and strong. Yes, a hot day in the making. She is taking her time with me. She questions, tests, assesses the parts of my foundation that have eroded through neglect. She knows I have retained the words, the credo, if such there be, but my sense of that mysterious inner truth is weakened by years of mistrust.

"How old is Aaron now?" she asks.

"He will be twelve soon."

"You feel neither hate nor love for Emily, even though she has taken him from you? Wronged you?"

"I don't hate her."

"That's good. That's as it should be."

"I'm neutral, yes,.. which is correct, I suppose. But I cannot be neutral in my feelings for Aaron."

"Though he is not your own, you feel an intense love for him. I know this."

"Yet the proper thing is to work towards complete neutrality."

"No. We must aim more towards a state of not desiring to possess someone. If we want to possess them, we cannot truly love them. To love them, we must be able to set them free."

"Yes,... but,..."

"And of course you still believe fate is hostile towards you in this matter?"

She has hit the right combination of nerves, playing my neuroses like a concert pianist.

"Matthew?"

"If only I could find a way to believe that any good could come of it?"

"Tell me about the things we are meant to keep, Matthew?"

"They cannot be lost, even if we throw them away."

"And the things we are not meant to keep?"

"We shall lose them, no matter how hard we try to hold onto them."

"Good."

What is she saying? Aaron is returning to me? Or is he lost for ever? He was meant to keep, or to be lost?

"Ghita, please?"

"You know I cannot answer! Even The Changes would not answer it - except perhaps to say that you should sacrifice all personal desire in this matter, accept you are not in control and trust in the unknown." She smiles. "I have no children of my own, so am not best qualified in these matters, but I do know that young boys become defiant young men, and therefore I advise that wherever you wander, you make sure a young man will not have too much difficulty in tracing you from one address to another. As for why he was taken from you, you have always been aware of the possibility, even from before the time of his birth. Your feelings for him make him another symbol of something in yourself."

"I must accept his loss, but make sure it's easy for him to come back to me? Yes,.. yes."

"And try to think of what it is you are learning through this experience, about the nature of your life. About what Aaron *means*,... in the magical sense."

"It was right for him to come into the world. But was that the extent of my responsibility? Should I not have grown so close to him?"

"You acted correctly in all respects, my love."

"No. I acted selfishly. Inside of me I thought a child would keep us together.

Emily and I should never have got married. We weren't right for each other. We got on each other's nerves, so why did I want to preserve it?"

"Emily was your home, Matthew. You know this. We discussed this years ago. She was the transfer of your Anima, from its early years of being projected onto your mother. She became for you, in a sense, your mother, your centre. You could not see the real Emily, the true Emily, because you were not looking at her. And you could not leave her because sometimes the mother in us is strong, even to the end of our days. Be careful you do not allow Beatrice to assume this role as well. For now you must remain trusting that things will work out for the best, for the both of you."

Dawn is complete, and we emerge by the farm where my vehicle lies undercover. We stand beside it, Ghita and I, two creatures from a time when such conveyances were either not thought of or already long obsolete. She traces her fingertip lightly through the muck on the roof, tracing out a line I know I shall long treasure as a sign that we once stood together like this.

"Matthew, there is a lady recently come from the United States. She is acquainted with our,... ways,... having practised under wise teachers in Los Angeles. Would it trouble you to partner her in the Practices, before you return to Cragside?"

"Ghita, it's been a long time since I,...."

"But you have kept up with the practice,... I mean, privately?"

I am almost embarrassed to admit it. "Yes, of course."

"Then you will have no difficulty."

"If you wish it, I shall be glad to."

"I think it will help you to be reminded of this aspect of our lives."

She looks pensive for a moment, then smiles, and traces out a circle which she intersects with a lazy "S"- the Tai Chi. Her tradition is Hindu, her interests boundless, her instincts Taoist. "Yes, it would be good for you, I think, as much as for her. It would remove the last remnants of the mask I see clinging to your face. It would remind you finally of your destination, and your purpose."

## Chapter 19

## The Practices

I do not know her name. This seems on the one hand obscene, considering what we are about to do, but on the other it is correct, for in this version of the practices a man is taught that it is not the person he comes together with that is important, but the idea of womanhood, of female, of yin. Similarly, she does not know my name. To her I am simply male, and manhood, and Yang.

This is the purpose of my preparatory bathe, and meditation,... to reacquaint myself with these ideas. Other schools, of both eastern and western tradition, would not agree with this; other students would insist on foreknowledge of their partner in order to engender trust. But our trust is through Ghita, and therefore without question. As for foreknowledge, I do not think I could ever have done this with Emily, or Beatrice, or Min, or anyone whose name I knew, for a name defines us, conditions us, encourages an emotional response based upon our past experiences of people we know. For a spiritual wanderer, there are many roads to choose, each leading to the same place. It is therefore for each of us to merely choose the road we feel is right for us.

And at the time, this was mine.

The waters of the spa smell briny, and they are comfortably hot. The oils I have rubbed into my skin bear the scent of rosemary and tea-tree. A dense steam hangs over the room, drawing sweat from my pores and making me dizzy. But then, taking up the lotus in meditation, I feel clean and clear headed. No clothing is worn from this point and I must try to remember what it feels like to be a man sitting in the skin I was given, free from all the layers of deceit we are apt to drape around ourselves. My body is middle aged, with middle aged marks and middle aged bulges, but the main thing is that it still works. In all likelihood I cannot run more than a hundred yards without doubling over and gasping for breath, but I can attain the basic postures of Hatha Yoga, and other practices, without discomfort or strain, and for now this is all that matters.

I remember Ellen McBride at this point and imagine her sitting before her mirror, trying to reacquaint herself with her womanhood and I am plagued by an inappropriate arousal. Where did that come from? I do not reject the image for that would only serve to reinforce it, so instead I draw it near and invite it's confidence.

*"Could it be that I desire you Ms McBride?"*

*"You might think not," she says. "But you are intoxicated by my domineering spirit, an intoxication rendered all the more stupefying by the discovery of my vulnerability. You steal my energy, draw my maleness into yourself, so that I become you. This is my trap. And oh, how I enjoy the feel of your maleness."*

*"But you think I'm weak, you think I'm a very feminine sort of man. What flavour of maleness have I that would interest you?"*

*"Yours is a subtle maleness. It shuns the competition of other males. It meets force by yielding until the force is spent. You can yield yourself into nothingness, then return to yourself. But fullness can only grow until it bursts. This is your strategy."*

*"If only I were so resourceful."*

*"Perhaps this is my purpose then, to show you this side of yourself."*

*"I was being ironic. I already know this side of myself."*

*"Then I might teach you to value it more, by having you teach it to me."*

In an older parlance this can be described as a visit by a spirit messenger. In depth psychology it is the manifestation of an archetype, a strange chimerical being of purely psychic energy, but no less real in its effect upon the run of my thoughts. It fades now, goes on its way and I am heartened by its coming, heartened that such things still think me worth the effort.

I meet with her in the Jade room. She enters from behind the long silk drapery, nude and bathed and spiritually calm. She is a woman in her late forties, long dark hair run through with strands of grey, and still damp. She hold her hands together in a gesture of respect for my maleness and I am moved, both by her reverence and by the sense of purpose I detect in her eyes.

I press my palms together and bow in reverence of her femininity which strikes me at once as round and potently fertile, in spite of her long faded youth. She has a fine, friendly face, a beautiful face and a warmth that puts me at ease. Hers is a gentle soul as are all the souls that cluster around Ghita.

"Hello," I say.

"Hello," she replies.

I need not tell her she is beautiful, for even if she were it would only be a distraction. Nor need she tell me I am a fine figure of a man. These things do not matter. All that matters is sincerity, and this is mutually sensed for we are both encouraged to draw near, and to kneel close, knees not quite touching, legs wide, backs upright.

And thus we begin.

By traditional Western values all of this is immoral, but the counter argument runs that those who would persuade us to be ashamed of our natural functions are themselves misguided and that times must change. Our youth have already rejected the stern standards of yesterday, but need guidance in a way that teaches them to both respect and enjoy their sexuality. And what chance is there of that when we adults cannot speak of sex without embarrassment?

What makes it right for me is that I look at her, and all I see is a woman, while all I feel myself to be is a man. Our training in these arts means there is no

doubt that each of us will leave this chamber having experienced a state of altered consciousness, so there is no pressure to perform, nor conform to any rigid pattern of behaviour. I do not come to take or cheat this woman, and she does not come in search of a lover or a husband.

We simply smile and we look at one another. It is a smile of love, a smile we first imagine smiling to ourselves and feeling its love before directing it outwards to our partner. Then, in simplistic terms, we each imagine lines of energy within ourselves, two channels - one running up our spines into our heads, and the other looping back down our chests, through what the Taoist practitioners call the Dan Tien, just below the navel. Along these lines there are knots of energy, which we imagine in turn, at the base of the spine, the back of the head, the crown, the temple, then down to the root of the sex, and below, to the perineum. And as we imagine them we sense them opening, blossoming and releasing warmth into our bodies, and then we imagine an energy circulating. All of this takes time, but there is no hurry, no sense of having to get on and get down to it. The energy is everything. Without the energy, the Tantric way is just another fancy way of having sex.

Perhaps this sounds unlikely, that we can simply sit apart and imagine something in our bodies that no medical instrument can measure. But once felt, it matters nothing to us whether it can be measured or not. We know it is there, and that it circulates so readily in the presence of one another is a good sign. The circulation of the energy already confers upon us a state of relaxed detachment, and mutual bliss.

Of course the aim here is more than separateness and at a moment judged by some mysterious mutual consent to be correct, she reaches gently across, as do I. Then we touch and begin to feed the fire of an arousal, but carefully, and in tune with the rhythms of our breathing, rhythms more imagined than heard or felt.

My partner is gentle and I find it easy to work with her, to visualise her as the embodiment of all that is worthy of worship, and as she inches me closer to a biological climax, I do indeed begin to worship all that is feminine. She becomes a goddess, she becomes Anima, she becomes the controller fates, the dragon's breath. She knows me well, knows my state through the slight movements of my body, the patterns of my breath and she steals the moment of climax with a consummate ease, peels it open so that I sense no ejection of seed. Then I let down the energy, like a heaviness into my lower self, which ignites the potent mix and I take the rocket-ride up my spine into a state of light.

As the first wave passes, I reciprocate, reading her I hope as well as she reads me. And she has the skill to feed upon her sex, to raise her own energy, to draw it away from the moment of muscular contraction. We do this many times, feeding our wheel of light with a deftness of touch until we have the measure of each other. Then she takes the lingam, indicates the readiness of her yoni, and I enter.

The posture is deep, arousal heightened, and we are pressed together in such a way that our movements can not help but be gentle, for gentleness is all that is required now - no thrusting, no huffing and puffing. Wave upon wave washes over us and through us before we sense the energy of our channels begin to merge, like a sparking from the tops of our heads, and we become conjoined. What comes next can only be described as a mystical drifting off into light.

At some point I find myself afloat amid illuminated jade and ruby silks, riding upon waves of erotic incense, the fragrance of my partner's dewy flower. I am coherent, my senses intact, so it puzzles me that I can never adequately describe what I see when in this condition. Some talk of profound insights, and though I can swear to a sense of a deeper understanding of myself and my place in the world, it is as if the language deserts me when I emerge, and can no longer articulate even to myself what it is I have experienced, other than light and a feeling of completeness, a feeling that there is nothing separating me from everything else, that the body and the mind containing me form only an approximation of being, that the mind can escape the flesh and maintain for itself a meaningful reference, an odd third person, a disembodied and dreamlike awareness - self assured, wise, loving, and indestructible. As incomprehensible as it might seem, the most abiding thing is a feeling that what I sense myself to be, and the world I believe I perceive, are the same. There is no difference between us.

Then, for me, as for my partner, these things always end with a call back to the mother ship of biological form, and then tears,... tears of joy, of unbridled emotion - no stiff upper lips here. And sometimes, as now, we simply hold each other. As I lie against her breast she strokes my hair, full of love for me, as I am full of love her. But then I feel myself recovering, sense myself becoming watchful at the frontiers, waiting to count the thoughts as they come scurrying back over the borders of a more mundane perception, plunging deep into the rabbit holes, and losing themselves once more in the tortured knot of my unconscious mind.

The first to cross the borderland,..

is the mystery of Beatrice.

## Chapter 20

## Ghita's reading of the Changes

I return to my studio after midnight to find Ghita is waiting inside. She is kneeling by the low table, gazing into the steady flame of the candle. There is a copy of The Changes to one side of the candle and a bundle of Yarrow stalks on the other. There is a significance to this symmetry that makes me swallow hard.

There are fifty yarrow stalks in the bundle. I know this because they are the traditional way of consulting The Changes, a process of counting and ordering that takes anything up to half an hour. This method comes to us from deepest antiquity, and purist disciples of The Changes will not use any other. My own experience however is that for certain types of meditation this is too slow. Ghita has shown me other methods, with coins and with her bangle of beads, for example, that take only a matter of seconds, methods that are needed for times when the meditation involves a form of conversation with The Changes, an exploration of an issue by circling it and coming at it from any number of different angles. However, for the big questions, the questions of primary importance, the ones that determine the turning points of a man's life, the yarrow stalks bring an unrivalled sense of gravity and focus.

"I sense you are still floating my love," she says.

I kneel before her, the candle between us. "Yes, it's been a long time since I felt this. Not since my earliest instruction,... with you."

She smiles, clearly amused by my attempts to flatter her. "Would it inconvenience you to partner this lady again?" she asks.

"If you sense no danger in it"

"She's sincere. There is no danger."

"Then of course. It would not be inconvenient, and it would please me if you felt you, and she, could call upon me."

"Good." And then, regarding me closely: "You have grown, my love. Your time away from us has not been wasted,... though I know you fear it has."

"I'm beginning to see the roads that led me here. And perhaps the roads that will take me on. My doubts have a lot to do with fear. I remember that fear is concerned always with the future. We never fear the past, do we? Unless it's the future discovery of something we might have hidden there. Of course the future will take care of itself, and if we approach it with the right frame of mind, we ought never to fear it. You taught me this a long time ago, and I'm ashamed I could ever have forgotten so valuable a lesson."

"Do you remember also I taught you that the path never runs in a straight line,

that we orbit our destination, alternating between states of certainty and doubt, between darkness and light?"

"Yes. But still I needed you to guide me back into the light."

With a sweep of her hand she spreads the stalks out upon the table, and I imagine the reading is about to begin. I am tense with anticipation, for I have not lost my reverence, nor my fear of The Changes, especially in the hands of one so insightful as Ghita. But then she sweeps them back into a neat bundle. "You are wondering perhaps why I did not reacquaint you with The Practices myself."

"I had wished it. But I understand why you chose another partner for me."

"Describe to me your understanding."

I lower my head so that I do not meet her eyes. "You know why."

"Yes,... but you should still confess it."

"Very well. I confess that from the earliest of our days, I have loved you - not as a friend or a teacher but as a remarkable and beautiful woman. I have projected every aspect of the divine-female upon your head, though I know nothing about you,.. nothing about the Ghita beyond these walls, beyond the gardens of your home and the Yoga classes in the old church hall. I confess I still love you, still worship you, and so without thinking draw energy from you with all the hunger of a starving man. This unbalances you, and prevents me from growing to the point where I no longer need you. It is your calling to nurture others and release them when they are ready. From time to time however, you encounter hangers on like me, tiresome men who cannot let go."

She frowns. "Self loathing is never the wisest course, my love."

"I cannot see there will ever come a time when I do not need you. This I confess. Nor can I say I believe I am misguided, or weak in my dependence upon you. This too, I confess. Nor can I say that if the time should ever come I would not lay down my life for you."

"Hush,... hush now,... enough."

"I am yours,... I will do anything you ask of me. And this is why there must always be a distance between us: for safety,... yours and mine."

"You know I do not nurture disciples. You cannot follow my path, nor describe it to others, because it is not your path, nor theirs. It is mine alone."

"I understand. But I seek only to serve you, not deify you,... nor spread your gospel."

"I do not nurture servants either, Matthew. What I nurture are equals. What I want is one day for you to look into my eyes and see a woman looking back at you,... not a priestess, not a guru, not a divine being. One day your studentship with me must end and we must face one another as equals, each drawing counsel of equal wisdom from the other."

"That will never happen."

"It must, if you are to grow."

"Then I shall never grow beyond this point, and I shall be happy to remain for ever in your service."

She reaches out and I feel her palm against my cheek. "Dearest Matthew,... you came to me in doubt, and now you offer me your life?"

"I have never doubted you. As for my life, it has always been yours."

She begins to shake her head, not in defeat, nor resignation,... but from her smile I see it as a kind of sly acceptance. "If this pleases you."

"Nothing gives me greater pleasure or strength."

"Even though you understand the risk of it inflating all that is inferior in me?"

"I do not give myself lightly. My faith in you is instinctive, and I trust your ability to remain in balance. There is nothing in your psyche that is not your own, and you are as close to your original unadulterated self as anyone I know."

"You are mistaken if you believe I am better than anyone else."

"Even by saying that, you become better than most of the people I have ever met."

"You accept this is a delusion?"

"Not a delusion. A fiction perhaps."

"Very well, as your mistress I command that you seek Beatrice. Talk to her. Be Joshua,... be yourself,... be whomever she needs you to be. We must release this energy and let it take whatever form it desires. Only you can do this. You hold the key. It is for you to recognise what that key is, and how you should use it."

"I'll do as you say. I'll go back. Of course I must. I know you do not seek leadership, Ghita, but I feel better able to succeed in this, knowing I've been sent by one such as you."

She does not read for me that night, but gathers the stalks and the book together, leading me to understand there has already been a reading, not for my guidance but for her own. That it was carried out here, leads me also to understand that it concerns her relations with me. It is not insignificant that I understand this,... that I am reminded Ghita, as a person, has a purpose of her own in relation to everything else.

"You do not have a lover, Matthew?" she asks me, suddenly.

The question surprises me. Also surprising is my embarrassment. "No, I,... no longer seem to desire women in that way. Understanding the effects of projection, and controlling them, I'm no longer curious about every passing

female, as I once was."

"Nor desirous?"

"Desirous? Well, yes,... of course. That's biology and not much I can do about it, I suppose. But these feelings pass."

"You do not rule it out though, the possibility you might take a lover in the future?"

"I rule it neither out nor in,... but I do not seek it, for now. If the opportunity presented itself and it felt right,... of course I would not rule it out. I've slept alone for such a long time and often, when I'm lonely, I think it would be good to have a warm body to curl into at night, one that would respond,... but I could not see such a woman as I have seen others in the past,..."

"How then would you see her?"

"As someone who was alone, like me,... that even together, we would each still be alone. I suppose if I were stronger, I would not need a comforting presence. I suppose if I were stronger I would see no point in a relationship unless one partner were nurturing the other, like a parent preparing a child for its own lonely path. Like my love for Aaron,... there was a purpose to that, but my love for Emily,... I see now there was no point in that at all."

"Other than your presence at the critical moment that decided Aaron's fate."

This surprises me. "Well, other than that, yes."

"But you see no point in love between a man and a woman?"

"Of course there is a point,... but the point is biological, not spiritual. It's perhaps easier to recognise this as we age, easier to turn our back on the idea of love, if we so choose, as I have done."

"But you said you were in love with me."

I feel a shiver and wonder what it is she's trying to teach me now. "That's different. You are the last projection I permit myself. But equally I understand you and I shall never marry and nurture children. A man does not marry his queen, though he might love her more than his own life."

"And if his queen should fall?"

"Then he falls with her. But you shall not fall, Ghita."

"I am flesh and blood, Matthew. One day I shall fall."

"As shall we all."

"And do you fear death, Matthew?"

"Of course, though I am perhaps a little more accepting of it these days. But why this talk of death?"

She smiles, and I recognise the smile is a mask, something to draw down and

disguise a meaning she does not want to betray. "You must sleep," she says. "I will leave you to prepare your road."

## Chapter 21

## The prescience of dreams

O'Doire had a fine collection of New Age books - everything from Auras to Zenner Cards and I seemed to spend a good deal of time in this section, not so much reading these works as seeking them out in response to on-line orders. He was always keen to maintain a good stock of this kind of thing, not, he said, out of any personal leanings in that direction, but simply because they were always very much in demand.

There is of course within us all a natural yearning for knowledge of things beyond the rational, a yearning that might easily be channeled into religion, but while religion is fine for many people, equally, for many others it is not, and though some of us appear content to believe in nothing, a significant proportion of us seem willing to believe in all manner of strange things.

One might point to the 1960's as a particularly whacky period, the rise of the New-Age, one might say, but the roots of this movement can be traced back much further in time, to the writings of westerns mystics in the latter part of the 19th century. Indeed every age has had its share of mystics and seers who attempted to perceive the spiritual nature of man outside of mainstream convention - it really only caught on once the state was persuaded to abandon its habit of persecuting and occasionally even executing practitioners of the "occult".

Naturally, considering the strangeness of my own beliefs, I was obliged to keep an open mind about most things. However, of all the titles we held, and that I described to her, Ghita expressed no opinion either way as to their worthiness, and none of them seemed to make up even a fraction of the structure of her own philosophy.

"If it pleases you to believe in the healing power of crystals," she once told me, "then I see no harm,... provided the crystals do not come with too high a price tag, for then you might be justifiably suspicious. As to whether or not they work, I cannot say, for I have never bothered with them myself."

Ghita was not a child of the New Age but of an age that was perhaps older than religion, an age as old as mankind, when we lived much simpler lives, an age that predated devices and structures and hierarchies and detailed depictions of the supposed nature of things. If she had a system it was purely meditative. If she listened to spirit voices, they were no more than the subtle energies of her dreams. If she engaged in the black arts of divination, it was through the exclusive interface of The Book of Changes, and if she championed the use of psychedelic states, we were taught how to induce them, shall we say, by following entirely natural physical practices, rather than gulping down or injecting synthetic chemicals.

The Practices, she said, were the passageway to a realm that might not be understood, but it could be considered effective as a picture postcard of something one might aim towards in our every day lives. The rest: the dreams, The Changes, the meditation, all were navigational aids. *If I did this, would this be correct? What am I doing wrong here? Why am I unhappy? Why do I feel so anxious?*

It was a deceptively simple philosophy, easy to describe, but hard to master. It required an acceptance of the unknown as being an entirely unknowable, yet at the same time a completely benign phenomenon. It also required us to harness our will to the working out of its purpose. Everything else,... happiness, calm, spiritual well being,.. joy,... all would follow of its own accord, and in its own time.

*"But how long?"*

*"How long, my love? Well, how long have you got? This is not about arriving. Our destination is in all cases the same anyway,... death,... and something we would do well to postpone as long as possible, if only because a longer life allows us time to achieve a greater understanding of it. What is important here, my love, is merely a proper appreciation of the journey we each undertake."*

Following the conclusion of my time at The Retreat, I returned to the book shop and as if by some strange synchronicity found myself seeking out a New Age title for an Internet customer. It was by a certain lady author with a long and impressive list of qualifications, including M.D. Before dispatching the book I took a moment to flick through it. There was a lot of talk of astral planes and power harmonies and psychic focus points. The said lady claimed to possess psychic powers, and for a fee could develop the psychic powers of others, or diagnose serious ailments simply by studying a person's aura. For a fee others could read her words and for a fee attend her workshops - visit www..... for your nearest venue.

I did not understand her language which consisted of a lot of complicated and unfamiliar words. It reminded me of those company meetings where a well groomed, designer-suited executive would begin to speak in acronyms and tortured, circular phrases which, when followed attentively, appeared to vanish up their own backside. He knew what he wanted to say, but was quite incapable of putting it across to others, and succeeded only in making us all feel inferior, afraid to admit we did not know what the words meant in case our ignorance reflected poorly on our right to be working there in the first place. So we'd nod our heads and grant the man our blind support.

Ghita would not have understood the lady psychic's language either, for Ghita's language was always very simple. I could not see the so called human-aura, though this was pretty much a pre-requisiste credential for any self respecting New Ager, but I consoled myself with the knowledge that Ghita did not claim to be able to see them either. I did not know anyone who was

psychic,... not even Ghita,... though she and her students could sometimes be alarmingly empathic.

"Those who come to me," she said. "I will teach."

"But how much do you charge?"

"I ask only your trust, my love. Keep your money to feed and clothe yourself."

I trusted Ghita for her simplicity, and tended to avoid entanglement in the snares of any rigid system of belief. But for the child of a western education, there is always a desire for proof of something before it can be accepted. I imagine this is partly our conditioning. Even from birth we are introduced to the idea of one intangible concept after the other, only to have each systematically shattered in their turn: the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny, Father Christmas,... it's interesting that we are also introduced to God at this early age, but following the destruction of so much mystery the lesson is almost implicit that God should equally be considered of no use in the adult world, a phenomenon to be outgrown, no matter how magical and comforting the concept might prove to us in later life.

"I cannot prove to you that God exists," said Ghita, the first time I went to her home, a decade ago. "But I can prove to you there's more to your reality than you currently believe."

It was The Practices she first showed me. I was younger then, and drunk on the possibility we might be become lovers. So beautiful she was, so delicate, so gentle, and so very kind,.... but when she brought me to the light that first time, I understood the seriousness of her purpose, that she loved me as she loved the whole world and everything in it.

But what was the light?

To a practical mind, even feelings of a deeply spiritual nature, and a profound reverence for all that is female, might easily have been induced by an unknown cerebral chemistry. After all, there is nothing mysterious about the Tantric Practices. They are embedded in many eastern traditions, but equally there are many other schools that seem to have discovered them independently, in Europe and America and who teach their own versions, as Ghita teaches hers. Now, a glass of wine can infuse a person with a sense of profound well being, as can The Practices,... but what does it teach us of the nature of life, other than a human being's susceptibility to inebriation? No, I thought, the practices were not proof of anything, and so ran the current of my thoughts until she also taught me to pay attention to my dreams.

"My dreams, Ghita?"

"Your dreams my love."

"But Ghita, I do not dream."

"Yes you do. We all dream. Every night. But a dream's purpose is mysterious and we are conditioned to forget them, so you believe you do not dream. First,

I shall teach you to remember them."

It was a matter of simply asking myself, before I slept, to retain the dreams I thought I did not have, and sure enough I discovered that I dreamed,... not bad things, but mainly strange, incomprehensible things. She later taught me there was a language by which these things could be interpreted but that this was not important, that I need concern myself with nothing more than on waking, sitting down with a cup of coffee, and writing out my dream.

"You must do it every morning," she said.

"But,... to what purpose, Ghita?"

"I will not say for now,... but leave it for you to discover. You must be diligent. You must capture a dream every night for at least six months, and then we will see."

That last night, at the retreat, I dreamed of the book shop. There were details and images and symbols drawn from my past association with the place,... the smell of O'Doires cigarettes, the dangle of his watch-chain, and a sense of anxiety. I was searching for a book requested by a mysterious customer. The computer insisted we had a section upstairs where the book resided but I could not find the section because O'Doire in his eccentricity had renamed the categories. It was an anxiety dream, not a simple one, for in it I suspected there also lay clues as to the path I might take in the resolution of matters,...

"You're looking better, Matt," said Min, as she climbed the stairs to her domain,... a copy of the 'Story of O', tucked under her arm.

She moved well, a slow step and a wonderfully arousing roll of her well rounded derriere. I realised I was staring at it when she had she passed,... not, I hoped, in a desirous way,... more appreciative that there was such beauty, such potency.

"I'm feeling much better now, thanks."

"Found yourself a woman then?"

"Several."

"Good for you," she purred. "You naughty boy."

She seemed to feel me staring and paused, then looked back down the stairs, one eyebrow raised in query. I said nothing, but continued to gaze at her, smiling appreciatively.

"What?"

I shook my head. "I'm not dreaming this am I?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"But just to be sure, that is the 'Story of O' you have tucked under your arm isn't it?"

"Yes. It's an illustrated edition. Do you want to come and have a look at it? The artwork is exquisite."

"Erm,... maybe later."

I don't know what symbolic purpose my unconscious had in presenting me with an image of Min on the stairs like that. It would perhaps come to me later I supposed, but the important point was that the scene I described to you just now was the second time I had described it. The first had been in my dream diary, a jotted note: Min, stairs, bottom, studded leather trousers, 'Story of O'. It was a dream dreamed about six hours before the event.

The first time this sort of thing had happened to me I'd felt my rational world implode. I had dreamed of taking a trip by barge through an industrial backwater, an unremarkable dream that had made no sense to me on waking, but the following evening I had been channel zapping at home, and zapped straight into the image of that dream, a documentary on industrial archeology, a journey by barge through an industrial backwater - no question,.. the image of my dream exactly.

"Is this proof enough of something strange?" Ghita had asked, after I'd run to her. "Is it perhaps evidence of something the rational world has not prepared you for?"

"It must have been a coincidence!"

"If you prefer to think of things that way,... come back to me when you are prepared to accept its strangeness."

The images kept coming, odd prophecies yet completely meaningless and unpredictable: the arrangement of some cakes on a plate, the shape of a surgical instrument in a TV drama, the number on a raffle ticket I bought from a colleague,... So I stopped recording my dreams, asked myself to forget them, not to retain them, and duly I returned to a largely dreamless existence, as before.

"The purpose of dreaming," explained Ghita, "is not well understood. Of course it is dismissed by rational people as meaningless, but for what I believe are entirely irrational reasons. The human body does nothing, and contains nothing that is meaningless, so why label our dreams as such? Dreams often reflect our anxeties do they not? And sometimes, they show other things, things that can be perhaps understood by taking the dream images in isolation and reflecting upon what they mean to us personally, the memories or feelings you associate with certain symbols, or scenes, or people for example. With insight, and intuition, we can usually weave a story from these things and generate useful meaning from them.

"But the dream can only work with images we have personally seen. If you like, the dream plunders our memory chest for costumes and props it can use in its allegorical performances,... did you not think it strange all your so called prophecies were of things you personally witnessed? They were images of

things you subsequently saw with your own eyes. These were not prophecies, my love, but memories of events you had yet to experience. We all have this ability. I cannot explain it, but it raises a lot of interesting questions, don't you think?"

Min sat down upon the stairs and gazed at me. "If you'd only smack my bottom," she said. "It would make a dream of mine come true."

She sounded sad and gave a wistful sigh.

"I'm afraid my heart wouldn't be in it, Min. You know I feel only tenderness for you."

"I know, I know,... you'd want to change me. You'd want to make me a nice safe little housewife, have me wear an unflattering dress, and sensible knickers."

"Yes, and that would be my mistake of course - though I'm not sure about the sensible knickers."

She gave me a cheeky grin. "How can I fancy you so much, when you're so unsuitably straight laced?"

"Perhaps you think you can change me,... ignite the depths of my passion by showing me the illustrations in your book."

"They're very good illustrations,.. deliciously erotic."

"I'm sure they are,..."

"And I don't,... you know,... want to change you. I understand that would be like destroying the very thing I find so sexy about you."

"Likewise, Min. And so we circle each other, both of us not quite knowing why. Min,... if I were to leave the bookshop and go away somewhere, would you write to me?"

"Leave?" I saw the tears welling up at once. "I've always known it," she said. "I kept telling myself no, that you were happy here, that you'd never go, that one day I'd persuade you to move in with me and we'd grow old together in this place."

"I'm already old, Min. When you're old, I'll be dead."

"That's ridiculous."

"But will you write to me?"

"Can't I telephone instead?"

"There are no telephones where I'm going. You will have to write."

"Then of course I will. Give me the address."

It was a mystery why I had wanted to maintain contact with Min. Indeed I often think it would have been kinder to let her go, but something bound us, a

mystery that had yet to be resolved.

* * * * *

# Book 4

## The Book of Games

***I love acting. It is so much more real than real life.***

***Oscar WIlde***

***Irish Dramatist, Novelist and Poet***

***1854 - 1900***

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## Chapter 22

## The opening of the game

Those of you still caught up in the regular stream of your tangible existence might by now have some appreciation of how thoroughly detached I was becoming. I was forty five and had lived a regular sort of life for the most part, but since my thirties had found myself becoming gradually unplugged, and apparently absolved from all the usual responsibilities. It comes like this in old age, I suppose, when you are too weak and ill to be of much use, but already my actions, indeed my whole existence seemed to be irrelevant.

In terms of the machinery of a tangible life, I was utterly redundant, needed by no one and perhaps that was why I'd asked Min to write to me. She was a last fantasy of connection, the fantasy that a girl half my age, and possessed of very peculiar sexual tastes could actually desire the threadworn remains of my tangible being. And so, with just the flimsiest of threads linking me to reality, I returned to Cragside.

Trusting to luck is an impression that goes some way towards describing my frame of mind as I approached the house - casting myself upon the mercy of fate, is another. But you must remember, all of this is imagination,.. the way I felt, the way I saw the house, the way I allowed it to impress itself upon me,.. all were manifestations of a personal psychology, a personal myth. It's probable that you would not have felt the same, seeing it through your own eyes, and indeed it might have appeared quite ordinary to you, but this makes my own impressions none the less real. And so my return became also turning point, an auspicious moment,...

I entered by the back door, using the keys Lamarr had handed me a couple of hours earlier, and I braced myself for a vision of Beatrice, perhaps kneading dough or rolling out pastry, her hands and arms white with flour.

The kitchen was empty, but it was warm. The stove was lit, and all I could think was that the house had not died. You must forgive me if my approach to all of this infuriates you. There was of course a perfectly logical explanation for why the stove was lit, but I rejected logic. The stove was lit, and it was sufficient for me that I did not progress beyond that fact. I took a long, slow breath, breathed in the scent of woodsmoke and coffee,... and cooking fat. Then, moving through into the hallway, I breathed a familiar mustiness mingling with the sharpened perfume of furniture polish. I took the stairs slowly and checked the bathroom. It was sparkling and smelling of carbolic soap, but the bath had been used recently and I could smell lavender rising from its rim,... there were also little bits of lavender in the bottom of the bath.

I felt her looking at me from the shadows now, felt her presence in every nook and cranny of the place.

The room I had slept in that first night, the blue room, was exactly as I remembered it,... all dark wood and books,.... and the sheets on the bed were fresh, the pillows plumped up and soft,.. not a trace of dust or mould. It was ready for me, waiting all this time, all these years!

I did not go into her room. It was sufficient to stand by the closed door, my hand upon the doorknob. I could smell her most strongly there,... the lavender scented air leaking out from under the door. There was a logical explanation. Of course there was, but I did not go beyond the fact of her scent,.... and the fact of her presence, real or imagined.

Quietly, I tiptoed downstairs and I settled at the writing desk in the parlour. Along with the keys of ownership had come an envelope addressed to Mr. Matthew Rowan in a hand I did not recognise. Had I been an expert on such things I might have described the style of writing as pursposefully jagged, indeed the long strokes of the l's and the uprights of the f's were like drawn daggers.

*Dear Mr Rowan,*

*I trust my passing was painless, and I assure you that if I had any notice of it beforehand, then I was as surprised as I suppose you were. I had hoped to be around for a while longer than this, but lately I've begun to wonder if my weaknesses are the result of a physical abnormality of the brain, and so you must think of this business as being one of a controlling, dominant personality trying to cover all the possibilities, including that of my own demise. My purpose here is therefore quite unromantic, being essentially to think ahead and to find a way of securing a future for things that do not belong to me.*

*As you will by now be aware, the house resides in your name, as do the contents of my bank accounts, and also the ownership of rather an aged Landrover that I didn't quite know what else to do with. You'll find it hidden out in the trees about a mile towards the lake. I would like to think of the money as being used to keep the house in order, and I trust you to ensure that this is so. I suggest also, however, that if any of these things become difficult for you, then you must dispose of it all as you see fit. Sell the house for development and squander the money in whatever manner strikes you as being the most outrageous. However, I have the feeling that even if you burned Cragside to the ground, you'd find another in its place the following morning, so strong is the suggestion of its presence here, so strong the suggestion of a purpose beyond our understanding.*

*You are the only one who can further this now,... .*

*Yours faithfully*

*Mrs. Amanda Fleetwood.*

I felt a twinge of the old anger then and was once again waking up that morning long ago to an empty house in a Manchester suburb,... Emily and Aaron gone, and just a note from her to say that things were better this way.

But better for whom? The feeling of fate as a cruel arbitrator, as a user and waster of lives is sometimes a compelling one, but flawed,... if only because we are granted the ability to rise above it, to see beyond it. Fate had not murdered Amanda Fleetwood. Her time had come. She might have died in a bland executive brick-box, with nothing grander in her consciousness than the closure of yet another ailing business. No,.. fate had at least reserved for her a more mysterious purpose and a far more enigmatic end.

There was another letter enclosed with the first, but sealed in its own envelope and addressed to Joshua. This was coded, and so it took a while to untangle. The hand was of course quite different, and though the symbols presented to the unfamiliar eye a strange sort of font, it was possible to detect a gentler flowing of the pen, a more serene consciousness behind it, the daggers curled and rendered harmless by their sensuality.

*My darling Joshua,*

*This is something your Beatrice did not consider, and it worries me when I think that what I have recently begun to long for might actually never happen. Of course, a thousand times a day, I think about the time we spent together, and a thousand times a day I pray for you to ignore my spoken wish that you do not return. My heart aches for Joshua and you are he. I know this is how I planned it, and that I rely upon your promise to create in my heart the fantasy of pain and longing to which I had aspired. But as I write this, I tell myself that I shall wait only another year, and if you do not weaken, then I shall ask Amanda to relinquish her control in this matter,... I shall ask her to write to you, to ask if you will come back to me.*

*I feel such a warmth here, like first love, love for your memory, love for you in every way,.. for your gentleness, for your empathy and understanding,... for your lack of judgement, and of course for those precious nights we spent together, here in this lonely, lovely place. Somewhere in time my love, there will always exist that first night we shared, as there will always exist the night we sat upon the fell while darkness came down around us and the moon rose, a night when all that was in you gave yourself over to the care of all that was in me.*

*I do not know about the circumstances of Matthew's life and of course it is on account of such things that Joshua may not be free to come, no matter how much Amanda urges him to do so. This is what prevents her from making such an invitation - the fear of his rejection, the fear of his secret circumstances preventing him,... Of course, if you're reading this, my love, then I have not succeeded in realising the latter part of my desire for you and therefore my purpose is to let you know that in my heart, nothing would have given me greater pleasure than your disobedience, and your coming home once more to me.*

*With love and gratitude,*

*Beatrice.*

The clock chimed, sending its doleful tones throughout the house. I lifted the watch from my pocket and flipped open the case: five minutes slow,... which meant in fact the clock was five minutes fast. But I took the clock as my standard and wound the hands of the watch forward, so everything might be as it should and Cragside once again became the centre of all that was to happen here.

I stared blankly at the dial for a long time then, not really seeing it: Had she lived, we would have been together! That's what she'd said, hadn't she? Any day I might have had a letter from Amanda, asking me to go to her, to go to Beatrice! But if she was to be taken without seeing me again, what was fate's purpose in slipping such thoughts into her head? Had it been purely to intensify her sense of unrequited love, to make it feel truly attainable, to grant her tangible hope? If her days had been so numbered there was no reason, unless it had been in the passing on of that knowledge, so I would know it also.

But apart from my own pain, my own breaking heart at such a terrible revelation, what possible use would it serve? Was it to further test my patience over the idea of a benign fate, a fate that could also appear so unbearably cruel? Was it to set the hurdle still higher for me to leap over? Was it to test my fitness as a player in this strange unravelling of purpose? One could go on like this for ever of course, but trying to second guess fate is as fruitless a business as any I can think of. It's better not to dwell upon it.

I had brought nothing of the outside world into the house, except for The Changes and Ghita's bangle, but both these things predated Cragside so I felt no danger in placing the book square in the middle of the desk, and the bangle to one side. It was a statement of intent,... like a crucifix held up to ward off demons, and duly all the demons I'd felt crowding around me dissolved in its presence. It was the unknown I was doing business with here, and the demons were my own invention. The book spoke the language of the unknown.

It would be my guide.

This done, I took myself outside, and began the long climb towards the tarn. I did this to let the house swim over The Changes, absorb its presence, and understand my purpose in coming, accept my tools and my sincerity. I had not lost my grip on reality, for that suggests an accident, or misfortune. In fact, I had let go quite deliberately.

There are times in the Lakes when the light can render the most desolate scene as homely and charming, and there are others when the light acts only to emphasise a feeling of barrenness and desolation. Of course the land does not change, and these are subjective notions, but sufficiently real for anyone who has ever walked these hills to know exactly what I mean. That afternoon, it was an unbearable desolation I felt,.. unbearable because the last time I'd been that way I'd walked with Beatrice.

As I walked I scanned the fells for other lonely pilgrims, but there were none.

I had compromised on my costume and wore contemporary tweeds, clothes that served only to make me look rather older than I actually was, my O'Doire costume if you like, so I was not afraid of others jarring against a construct of my imagination. I could still be Joshua without taking things quite so far,... still be Joshua, yet brush against the tangible world as I needed to, without a change of clothing. Still, it seemed odd to me that afternoon how such a forgotten fold of hills could exist, that within so popular a National Park there could be places so unfrequented.

There was a presence though,... something I had not felt before among the hills,.. or rather I'd sensed it only weakly, like thorns through thick gloves. It was a tingling nervousness, a creeping fear, a reluctance to turn around in case I was struck down by a dreadful apparition. I stopped at once and challenged it, trying to determine if the source was out there or inside,... though Ghita would have it that both were one and the same. I focused on the rising song of a skylark, then a curlew,... songs of summer, songs of innocence and joy. Innocence,... acceptance, disentangling,... freeing oneself.

The feeling shrank. It was Ego then; Ego did not want me here!

"What is this?" I asked myself. "Would you rather invent demons and send us back to cower inside?"

"Yes," said Ego. "There's no need to face this now. Come on, let's go."

"But what dreams might we have to face with nowhere to hide tonight?"

"Leave it. Leave this place. Min wants us for her lover! Go back to her cosy little bookshop, you fool!"

"No. You must be calm. You must be trusting of me now. Our desire for Min is childish and destructive. We could only hurt each other."

And so we came upon the tarn, golden in the sunlight and ringed with mauve and violet, the fell ablaze with heather shades. How many ways could one present such a scene? How many lifetimes would I have to visit this place each day and see it even once the same? The stone upon which she had sat that first time, the sentinel stone, resembled now a menhir or a dolmen; aged, grey, and riven with fissures, a long shadow reaching out to trail its fingers in the waters of the tarn.

I made a slow circle of the water, my eyes drawn to its surface. There was a significance to this place, as there is to all sheets of water, but particularly the mountain tarns which seem to reflect not only the sky, but also the mood of the day. The surface was silvery, little ribbons of silver, drawn by waves of low amplitude but a high, tingling frequency that seemed independent of the movement of air across the fell, which was strange, for what else could be driving it? I was not entirely sure of my purpose in doing this, other than to announce my presence and state my compliance. Also, I suppose, I was making myself visible, not just to the unknown, but also in less spiritual terms to human eyes, to other beings similarly bound by the flow of things here. If

the game was to begin, then let it begin, I was saying, for I had come now and was ready.

Before descending, I paused upon the rim of the valley and gazed out over the Far Eastern Fells, waiting for a sign. Only a tired eye can see no beauty here and I reckoned my eyes were very tired indeed for what confronted me seemed almost unbearably flat and plain. Nothing! There was nothing! And Ego laughed at my self importance, at my childish expectation. What? Had I imagined my return would be marked by a fanfare of angel's trumpets?

It came slowly, just a slice of light brushing over the russet flank of the land. Then the clouds began to break. A million fractal shades of russet and grey began to drift eastwards and the fell purred like a giant ginger cat, its fur quivering with contentment. My mood lifted and the land caught me. I was not a stranger here, it said. I knew these hills. They had taught me once, long ago, how to succeed by pairing ego with humility. Those were old lessons, a safe and familiar chant like my A,B,C's Ego relaxed, felt safe once more,... safe among friends. This was a good sign, an omen that the fells had welcomed me back. There would be no bad dreams.

Returning to the house, I made more noise than was necessary, opening the front door and banging the mud off my boots on the path outside. I was more or less certain there was someone else around because I could hear the whistling of the cistern filling itself. Someone had run a tap or flushed the lavatory.

"Hello?"

No reply.

I checked upstairs but Beatrice's door was still closed. "Hello?"

I went into the kitchen to prepare a meal. I had brought enough supplies with me for a week,.. all fresh produce - ham and potatoes and eggs, fresh milk and tea,... a fresh baked loaf of bread,... nothing that was out of place. I left a sandwich and a cup of tea by her door, by the door of my ghostly Beatrice's room, then retired to the parlour to await the fall of night. My only company was The Changes and we talked long into the night. This was significant, I thought, for usually there comes a point when they break off; they begin to blur; become ambiguous and confusing. It is their way of saying *"enough",* but they held steady, held close even through my growing fatigue.

They warned me to empty myself,... to clear my heart, and my mind of all expectation, and to wait - *for only when we are empty is there room for what we seek to enter in.* Then the game that was beginning might work itself out in a matter of days,... or it could be years.

## Chapter 23

## The three players

Though you may find this unlikely, I still didn't know if I was alone in the house or not. The circumstantial evidence suggested I might not be, but without deliberately setting out to test the matter for myself, by opening the door to Beatrice's room, I could not say for sure. It was therefore merely as a precaution that I felt compelled to spend that first night with my own bedroom door locked.

The deeper part of me questioned this act, for it seemed to be a deliberate distancing of myself from the mystery I had come to embrace, but Ego insisted and for once I could not argue with his common sense. He even had the cheek to quote the Changes at me, stating that it was better to keep one's distance until we knew what we were dealing with!

It was in that room, the blue bedroom, I had first inhaled the dragon's breath, as Khan had put it, and I was prepared for all sorts of strange dreams now. I kept the journal open by the bed, with lamp and matches at the ready, but if I dreamed that night I was unable to recall anything, and I put this down to a continuing sense of unease preventing me from entering the depths of dream sleep, a fact confirmed by my weariness the following morning and an odd irritable feeling. But I was glad I had been spared the dreams, because when I emerged from my room I saw the plate and teacup had gone, and so I knew for sure that I was not alone. And that was enough to be going on with for now.

I had not yet digested this thorny certainty when the house resounded to a loud knocking that had me leaping from my skin, and what confronted me when I opened the door was no less disturbing. My visitor was a tall Edwardian lady. She wore a skirt of emerald green and a cream silk blouse, her face was partially hidden by a fine gauze that seemed part of a dainty hat. She looked hauntingly beautiful, and aristocratic, though rather stern with the corners of her lips turned down as if in disapproval. Was she an hallucination? A ghost? I felt the hairs rising on the back of my neck and had to resist the temptation to test the substance of her by sweeping my hand through the air in which she stood.

Surely, I did not know this creature,.. and yet?...

"It's me, you arse!"

"What? Ms. McBride?"

"Well, let me in! Do you think I want the whole world to see me dressed like this?"

"I'm sorry. Of course, please come in."

"It's been weeks. I thought you were never coming back!"

I found myself preoccupied by the fact that it did not seem to be an appropriate time. Indeed I felt my stomach knotting itself up at the inconvenience of it but I understood that this was merely Ego who had taken against Ellen from the start, because of the challenge she represented, I supposed. But in a place where time has no meaning, all moments are equally appropriate, just as when one is suitably receptive, nothing that occurs can ever be seen as inconvenient.

"You'd forgotten me, hadn't you?"

We stood in the passageway and I stared at her, astonished by her appearance, haunted by it. How could anyone be so,... changed?

"Ms McBride,... my God!! "

"I'll take that as a yes."

"No, no,.. I only meant,..."

"I did everything you said," she cut in. "I stared at my ridiculous body for the best part of two days. And all right, I'm prepared to accept there might be a woman in here somewhere. I've tried to be more ladylike when I'm off duty.... *but listen to me gabbling on. And you, you bastard,... not a word,... you could have got in touch,... not interested, I suppose,... fobbed off,... feel a complete fool,... dressed like this,... a complete fool,... you're all the same,.... you men,.... Bastards, complete bastards, the lot of you!*"

But for all of her incoherent scolding, I could see the ice was breaking. I felt its first shudderings in her voice. There were tears not far away, a dimple appearing in the centre of her chin and I was suddenly gripped by a mixture of compassion and horror at the thought that I might at any second be forced to put my arms around her, and comfort her.

"I've been away," I said. "This my first day back. How could I have contacted you when I've no idea where you live, or your telephone number, or anything?"

She wasn't listening. She turned upon her heel and was making for the door, perhaps thinking I'd run after her - so desperate was she for the feel of another human being. I regretted this, but I had to let her go, for all I had to give her were words and if she could not listen,...

"These things," I began,...

She paused. "What? What was that you said?"

"These things take time. I did not say I'd keep in touch. Only that we would talk again."

"Well,... I'm here,.. to talk."

"As I see."

She thought for a moment, this transformed harpy. "Do you think I enjoy feeling like this?... feeling so,... needy. Needing you,... a man like you?"

I paused to reflect, intrigued by the sensation that a part of my vital energy had begun to leak away. She had punctured me by her extraordinary manner, and begun drawing off some of my essence in order to support herself. A man like me! That hurt! It was rather like I imagined being stabbed by one of her stiletto heels,... the ultimate punishment of a proud woman, meted out to a man who does not measure up to her expectations. This was a dangerous thing for me to be thinking.

"It's warm out," I said, conscious also of that other presence in the house, perhaps listening to our words. For now these two phenomena seemed separate, and quite incompatible - it was only much later in the game I would realise how integral they were to the nature of things. "Why don't we sit at the bench under the willow. It's lovely there in the mornings. I'll bring some tea."

There was resentment in her voice, I thought - but I had the sense not to take this personally. It was her own self she resented, resented perhaps admitting that she was vulnerable, that she was lost and that she needed someone. But what could I do? She was not a child - she was a mature woman - and a part of me felt sure her ways were set, her neuroses so long established they had become part of the indelible pattern of her being. How easy it would have been, I thought, to dismiss her - the cast her off as hopelessly lost, except she recognised the need in herself, and that was a significant step in the right direction. I simply did not know what she meant, what she symbolised.

"Go and sit by the willow," I said. "I'll be a moment."

"You're not just fobbing me off?"

"Ms. McBride you are here, now. We can talk all day if you have the patience for it."

"Well,... the garden does look very pretty,..."

I brought tea into the little ring of sanctuary afforded by the willow's hanging curtain of feathery branches. She was sitting at the table, a proud figure, upright and ill at ease. She glanced nervously over her shoulder, and tried to close together the collar of her little jacket, as if to cover an imaginary décolletage.

"What if someone should come?"

"We are very private here. Also, these willow branches act a like a one way mirror. We can see out because we're very close to them, but no one can see in. We are invisible."

She nodded, though clearly she was still nervous.

"Really, I can't get over how feminine you look - I mean after the last time we met, but I suppose the question should be do you feel feminine?"

She scowled, then snatched up her teacup, clutching it around the rim as if she wanted to shatter it - sore point then. Perhaps the answer was no. "Your grass needs cutting," she said.

"I'll get around to it eventually. I only came back yesterday."

"I know. Lamarr told me."

"Lamarr? You seem to have a power over him,... yet he seems an unlikely informant."

"He's always keen to please me, so I make use of it, that's all."

"But why, I wonder?"

"He's just a nice man, okay? Look, I need to know,... I need to know what comes next in this."

"In what?"

"You said you'd teach me,... help me."

"We mustn't think in terms of a list of things to be learned, or a series of tests, or trials, Ms McBride. In truth I do not know what comes next. For now there is you and me, sitting beneath this lovely old willow, drinking tea. Very English, don't you think,.... But tell me, what compelled you to dress that way?"

"You think I look ridiculous?"

"Nothing is ridiculous here. Please, tell me."

She shrugged like a little girl found out in a lie. "Dunno," she said with remarkable sullenness. "It's this place, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"It's what you did,... you and her. You dressed up when you were here. I thought I should do the same."

"That's curious,..."

"So you *do* think I look ridiculous."

"Ms. McBride, please rest assured that I shall always speak my mind with you. I may not always be right, but I will always try to explain my view of things, as they appear to me at the time,... and you do not look ridiculous. You look very feminine, you look very beautiful in a way that I find disturbing. What's curious is that you should have felt compelled to make the effort, that's all."

"That's all right then,... I think,..."

Suddenly, her eyes were drawn by something over my shoulder. I had already guessed what she might have seen, but I resisted the urge to turn around myself, and decided instead to learn what I could of the phenomenon by

studying its reflection in Ellen McBride's face. At first, her mouth gaped open and she grew very pale.

"Are you all right?"

"There's somebody else here isn't there?"

"I believe so, though I haven't seen them yet."

He breast quivered as she took several deliberate breaths to calm herself. "Ooh,... that's eerie."

"Tell me what you see."

"It's her."

"Who?"

"Beatrice."

"No. Beatrice is dead, remember? You found her. And it's supposed to be me who has trouble accepting it, not you."

"Yes,... yes. But who's to say what Beatrice looks like? We're talking about ideas here, aren't we? The woman you knew as Beatrice probably didn't look like Beatrice either. Who's to say what Beatrice looks like? It's just that she feels like I imagine Beatrice to be, or something,...."

"Your intuition tells you this?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"Tell me what she's doing?"

"Just gazing out of an upstairs window. Looking directly at me, even as I'm describing her to you."

"Remember, she probably can't see us from the house. Can you tell me anything about her expression?"

"Why don't you look for yourself?"

"I can't just yet. What does she look like?"

"She's wearing a high necked blouse,... dark hair gathered into a knot on top of her head, like,.. an Edwardian lady, I suppose,... like me. She looks very calm, very still. Her expression is blank, not threatening, not submissive, not anything. Please tell me you didn't spend the night here with that woman in the house."

"I wasn't sure of her presence until this morning. She slept in Beatrice's room."

"So you did spend the night under the same roof?"

"As I said, I wasn't sure until this morning. She seems to seclude herself in there, when I'm around."

"I should tell you that I know who she is - No, I mean *really* know."

"I don't want you to tell me."

"Are you listening? I know her real name,..."

"I don't want to know it."

"And do you also not want to know that two years ago this woman almost castrated a man with a vegetable knife?"

Unconsciously, I think crossed my legs. "That,.. that sounds like the sort of thing someone might do in retaliation for something - something bad that was done to her."

"You can analyse it as much as you want. But this woman's not right in the head,.... she's a child,... a simpleton,..."

"Were any charges brought against her?"

"No, nor against the man who molested her - though "molested" is putting it mildly. But what if she bears a grudge against all men? She seemed genuinely concerned. "I hadn't expected this."

"Expected what, exactly?"

"Well, that in dealing with you, I would also end up dealing with her. I really don't think you should go anywhere near her - I mean either of us!"

"As I explained, I haven't been near her. In fact I've only your word that she exists now."

"Then turn around and look!"

"I'm not ready to deal with her presence yet,... nor, it seems, is she with mine."

"This is insane,... I'll deal with her then. I'll see her off - she’s no business here!"

She made to get up but I caught her arm gently, and settled her back down. I had not meant to touch her - it was purely an instinctive reaction, and I feared at once that she would be offended by it, but she did not fight my touch,... did not flinch nor try to slap it away, but instead looked down at the point of contact and thought about it for a moment.

I have often sensed something, like a spark leaping from one person to another at that first touch, a packet of information bearing the vital statistics, the things you need to know, and what I needed to know, indeed what I felt now was that in spite of her ferocity, Ellen McBride trusted me.

And that was astonishing.

"If she knows who I am," she said, "if she knows I'm watching, then maybe she'll think twice every time she picks up a knife."

"I don't think it would be wise for you to speak to her."

"All right, you've been warned, but for pity's sake keep your bedroom door locked at night."

"I will. I promise. But if she sticks a knife in me, it will not be without a purpose."

"Aye, the purpose being she's mad and the result being you're dead, you stupid man."

"Forgive me but if this person's as mad and as dangerous as you seem to be implying, then why hasn't she been sectioned?"

"I don't know,... so far as I'm aware there was just that one incident."

"Understandable too - I mean from what you imply."

"Maybe so."

"She's childlike, you say? a child in a woman's body? I've met such people before,.. though they don't usually have such presence,... or indeed such beauty. She seems very much in possession of her self."

"Beauty is it? Well, maybe so,... but whatever's going on inside of her you'll make no sense of it, Mr Rowan."

"Forgive me Ms McBride but it sounds to me as if your emotions regarding her are a little out of balance, a little irrational."

"Irrational?"

"Your face is a mask of calm, but I can see your heart beating,... is she still there?"

"No,. She's gone now."

"You should try to think about why it is you're so angry with her."

Her eyes flashed. We were in fruitful territory now. "I'm not angry."

"She frightens you then. Perhaps something you see in her reminds you of something in yourself you'd rather not admit to?"

She laughed at this. "You're *analysing* me?"

"On the contrary, I'm trying to show you how to analyse yourself. All of this,... the whole of life, is about understanding ourselves."

"All right,... all right." She took a deep breath, then smoothed her skirt over her knees - an action she drew out in order to gain time for her thoughts. "She's weak and pathetic. I know it's cruel to say it, but I can't help myself, and I hate myself for even thinking it, but there you are. I'm pushing forty, Mr Rowan and in the world I live in the only way to get by is to be stronger than everyone else. So I resent the fact that weak people seem to get by just the same. I'm afraid of being weak. I hate the thought of it. You have to fight,... fight all the time or else you drown in shit."

She held me with her gaze, something defiant in her eyes, as if this ability to fight was something she was proud of, but it was a thin veneer of pride and her vulnerability wasn't hard to see, like something warmer glowing beneath the ice, beneath the bitterness - something that redeemed her, something that raised her from the filth of irrelevance.

"It's not usually so easy to admit to something like that. "

"What makes you think it was easy?"

"Ha! You recognise how we tend to make the mistake of believing in our own abbreviated version of ourselves, the version with all the dark bits left out."

"Oh believe me, I'm aware of my dark bits, my dark thoughts, my dark, unspeakable fantasies."

"Have you ever admitted them,... confessed them?"

She sneered wickedly. "You'd like me to tell you about them? I bet you would! You should be so lucky."

"No, I'd probably faint. But you should tell them to yourself. Write them down, then burn them, or type them into a computer, then trash the file. But write them down."

She seemed surprised, as if she'd never considered the possibility. "I don't know,... I'd be afraid of it all falling into the wrong hands."

"Like you're afraid of someone seeing you dressed in those clothes, even though you know there's no possibility of it?"

"I suppose so,... but what would be the point, I mean,.. surely the point is to burden someone else by having them witness your badness."

"Have you considered the possibility that what matters isn't what's witnessed by others."

"Then what? "

"It's simply between you and the cosmos, between you and God if you like, if you believe in God. You mentioned the clothes,... tell me how do the clothes make you feel?"

"Most of the time, they make me want to scratch,... but if I can relax into them, I can they make me feel very sexy, you know?"

"Sexy?"

"Like I want to fuck." She gave a mock "Ugly word, that: fuck." She gave a mock shudder, then smiled.

"Sexy as a man, or as a woman?"

"A woman, naturally,..."

"Sexy as in sun or moon?"

"What?... Neither,... that's too deep for me. Are you trying to establish for certain that I'm a lesbian?"

"Your orientation is irrelevant. It's whether your balance is predominantly Yin or Yang that's important, then we can find out what it is that complements you. Do you feel more akin to the earth and fecundity or to the sky and the wind and the rain?"

"You'll be asking me next if I'm more of a tunnel than a train. Look, I know what you're driving at, and it's earth, all right! Definitely earth."

"That's interesting."

"What is?"

"For all your hard Yang shielding, your potent, male, leather outer, your essential being is definitely rose scented Yin. Now think about that. Think about your femininity, about your fertility,..."

"My fertility! For pity's sake, at my age? It's too late for feelings of fecundity, I'd say - the menopause is the only thing I can look forward to in that department."

"Don't be so dense! Think metaphorically, think about what it is you invite to complete your womanhood, your yinness."

"A dick you mean? Yours maybe? Ha! You wish - always supposing Beatrice doesn't get to it first, slice it off in your sleep and leave it lying next to you on the pillow one morning."

"You paint an excruciatingly vivid picture, but I wasn't thinking about mine - nor anyone's specifically. We should think more of a generic, universal,... phallus."

"Don't like the word dick either?" she teased: "Phallus then,... sure, okay: Generic *phallus*."

Clearly, she was not receptive to these ideas. Not many Westerners are. "We should perhaps leave it then."

"I'm sorry, but I find the idea ridiculous. It's just psychobabble."

"Perhaps - but at this level language of any sort is of limited use. Let's try another tack then. When you think of God, do you see a man or a woman?"

"I don't think of God at all. I find the idea ridiculous. And if there is a God then he's cruel, and yes, he's a man, because only a man could invent the means of human suffering I've been witness to over the years."

"I can understand that. But you don't have to believe in God in order to make sense of these things."

"That's good, because I parted company from him a long time ago."

"Me too, at least in the picture of God as a man, or indeed any sort of

comprehendible intelligence."

"But you *do* believe in a sort of God?"

"I prefer to think of God as the whole process - in my world God does not preside over the many ways of suffering. The world of suffering simply is, and it's up to us to deal with it as best we can. Everything is an expression of God. God is the perpetual union of male and female, the eternal orgasm if you like, that brings all things into being,... both good and bad."

"A typical man's view, if I may say, making sex the centre of everything. The universe as orgasm!? You'll forgive me if I smile?"

"It was not a man who persuaded me of this and remember that language is of little use in describing these things. Perhaps we shouldn't dwell on what God is,... a man with a white beard, or an abstract and eternal orgasm of creation,... ultimately all detailed speculation is futile,... even counterproductive. It sounds like you have no views of your own, but if you go any further you *will* experience things, feelings, events that you might find frightening unless you can ascribe them to a belief in something greater than yourself."

"Spiritual things, you mean?"

"Everything you're doing now is about plugging your spiritual light-bulb back into the mains. That's what will give you the purpose, and the comfort you're searching for. It's also unlikely your view of things will be the same as they were - you implied you once had some form of belief, a belief you subsequently rejected, am I right? "

"Yes,... but I don't rate your chances of converting me."

"It's not about conversion. It's not about convincing you of the correctness of my own view - I've enough trouble convincing myself of that. And it's not about the correctness of anyone else's views either. It's more about recognising the vision that's inside of you, and that's going to be as unique an expression of spirituality as you are a unique expression of humanity. I don't know exactly what will happen, Ellen. It may be that the only way you can reconcile your feelings is by returning to the church you attended as a child, by reconnecting there. You may become interested in the ideas of Buddhism or Taoism, or Hinduism,... or a little home-grown Wicca, or you may find your own personal mythology,... I don't know. Think of yourself as setting out on a journey. In five years time, you'll look back upon this moment and you'll be surprised by the change in yourself, but everything you will have become will be on account of you, your choices, your experiences,... your insights."

"Did you say five years?"

"Yes, terrible isn't it? Does the time bother you? It might even take longer. Your whole life perhaps."

"I'd sooner not bother,... it's all a waste of time isn't it?"

"If I told you it was a process whose conclusion was the experience of your

own death - whenever that might be. Would that make you feel better, or worse?"

"Need you ask?"

I took a sip of tea, took pleasure in the moment, the feel of the fine china in my hands, the taste of the tea, the faint scent of autumn in the air - and, it has to be said I savoured also the spirited company of this woman. "Time is not important. We have to forget the apparent slipping away of time, the feeling that we must do something now, for soon we shall be old. Only the present moment is of any importance, that vital sense of now, or as near as we can measure it."

"It could all just be middle age angst, though, couldn't it? Spiritual awakenings at our time of life are the classic symptoms of a mid-life crisis."

"That's true - but what is a mid life crisis if it isn't a desire to regain a sense of purpose for our lives? What is a mid life crisis if it isn't the total rejection of the sterility of the secular way?"

"But it could be a delusion, a crutch, a way of coping with our ignorance,.... to believe in a spiritual dimension."

She was panicking a little now, and I could almost see the revolutions she was making in her head, from light to dark, warmth to cold, certainty to doubt. The process had begun for her already!

"All of what you say is true. All of these things could merely be a way of coping with the fact of our own approaching death and the fear that there isn't really a lot to look forward to. But if we're being pragmatic about things then surely it's better to encourage a frame of mind where we approach our death with a sense of calm acceptance, than one where we suffer from an intense and debilitating fear."

"Okay, but it still sounds a bit cultish. Who taught you all of these things?"

"Her name is Ghita - she's my teacher. I've known her a long time."

"It worries me that you have a teacher,... a guru. It sounds New Age and faddy."

"I suppose you could call her a guru, though her philosophy is not to impress upon us her vision of things, more to teach us how to construct our own."

"And how does this Ghita eat? How does she earn her living? By taking your money, I suppose?"

"She's a lady of independent means, the daughter of a very wealthy businessman."

"So, she doesn't take money from you?"

"No. Look,... in our view, you don't pay for this kind of knowledge. This knowledge is the right of every man and woman, regardless of their ability to

pay. You and I were introduced by a meaningful coincidence. You have admitted to me that you are looking for something - something it is within my power, to some extent, to give you, so I feel obliged to pass on what I know, as Ghita felt obliged to teach me."

"In a way it would be easier to rationalise if she did take money,... and if you would accept money from me, like it was a night class in meditation or something,... it would define our relationship in more concrete terms."

"You seem to want this both ways. Why do we need to define our relationship? My relationship with Ghita is indefinable: friend, teacher, guide, confidante, queen, goddess, priestess,... each one might be accurate or inadequate or plain wrong, depending on the moment and the circumstances. You and I have come together in a unique way as well, and to define it would be to trim away some of its meaning for the sake of a simpler classification. We are what we are and we'll become whatever we become. Why should we be afraid of that?"

She was looking very uncomfortable again, pulling at the collar of her blouse as if it were chafing her skin. "And if I choose not to come here again?"

"That's for you to decide. Nothing binds us except Tao, and I'm not about to second-guess the mystery of the unknown, am I?"

She gave an emphatic nod, as if she were approaching some sort of conclusion. "Okay,... it doesn't sound like much of a cult to me. But there's one last thing I want to know: will any of this instruction involve at some point the sticking of your Phallus into my Yogi?"

"Yoni,... I think you mean your Yoni. You've been doing some reading on this? That's curious. But in any case the answer's no,... I have some knowledge of Tantric practices, but I'd be reluctant to encourage you in that direction."

She looked hurt. "Why not?"

"To be frank, you frighten me, Ms. McBride."

"So you're not just a dirty old man, then,... a psychobabbling charlatan who wants to put his hands up my skirt?"

"If all you want is sex, I'd rather you chose another partner. Also, the Tantra is a discipline and I would not be confident enough in my own proficiency to teach it."

She smiled. "I'm just being provocative - testing your responses."

"I understand. It's a good technique. Do you find me guilty or innocent? Deluded or sincere?"

"One can be both sincere and deluded," she said, and then she smiled. "But if it's any comfort, I think you're innocent."

All of this seemed, from my own perspective, to have been about justifying

my own beliefs, whilst from hers it seemed to have been about undergoing the first few revolutions of her own path, the first of the spiral orbits towards her own vision of the nature of reality, and her place in it, but we could have done this over a cup of coffee or a glass of beer on the waterfront at Windermere or Ullswater, surrounded by tourists. There was no reason for us to have undergone an initiation here, no reason for the shock of her clothing, at least not until she happened to mention she had moved out of the police house she'd previously shared with several younger colleagues.

"I'm renting a cottage in the next valley now," she said. "It's not much better than this place but at least it has electricity."

"Fernlea cottage?"

"You know it?"

If you look on a map and try to work out what's the nearest habitation to Cragside, it's a toss up between the Blackstone Inn and Fernlea. "I've seen it from the ridge. But how did you come to settle on Fernlea?"

"I asked at an agent's in Bowness, and Fernlea was the only one I could afford. As I said, it's not much - like this place, it doesn't even have a proper road to it but at least I can be private there."

"Then it was a matter of chance?"

"Entirely."

"It must be a challenge for you, such isolation,... no shops or anything."

"The trick is thinking ahead - no nipping out to the corner shop for anything. It's not so bad in summer, but winter will be the test."

"You know it's possible to walk from Cragside to Fernlea, over the fell, without crossing a road, without touching the twenty first century at all?"

"Yes, and I did wonder about it; it's two or three miles on foot, as opposed to ten by road but this costume requires a corset. The one I'm wearing permits only dainty breaths and the path is rather steep."

"Still,.. it's curious."

"Curious? You keep saying that."

"Ms McBride, there's something I need to explore here. I wonder if you would mind my calling upon you, at Fernlea? Shall we say at six tomorrow?"

"For what purpose?"

"I don't know. An experiment if you like. Six tomorrow, by my watch."

I took the pocket watch out to show her.

"But your watch is wrong."

"Set your watch to mine, then we are both out of time to the same degree.

This is important, I think."

"All right. And what shall we do, when you come to call?"

"A cup of tea would be nice - but if you could serve it while wearing your costume,... no leathers please, and if you could make the presence of the twenty-first century in your living room as unobtrusive as possible,..."

"That might be difficult - there's this hideous carpet straight out of the 70's, but I'll try. You know I think I prefer this side of you,..."

"Hmn?"

"The assertive side. Normally I resent men who try to boss me around,... but I find I can forgive you. Tell me, do you also intend spending the night?"

"I assure you, Ms McBride, a cup of tea will be all I shall require. Then I'll return to Cragside. It'll be safer for the both of us if all we do is talk."

"I look forward to receiving you then."

This had been a marathon of an encounter - an hour of the most intense conversation, on a par with anything I had exchanged with Ghita or Beatrice, and it served to underline the importance of this woman in the scheme of things. She seemed satisfied with my sincerity, satisfied also perhaps that my intentions were honourable - if such a word can be said to exist these days. And I did not feel the same tugging need about her when she left, which suggested she had regained her balance somewhat. This was good: it meant we could proceed on a proper footing. She warned me once again to be on my guard concerning my mysterious house-guest, then left me sitting at the table under the willow, where I remained for a further two hours, contemplating everything that had just passed between us.

How frustrating this must be for you, to learn of nothing more than my conversations, to discover that my actions involved little more than sitting and talking, and sleeping. In other stories there would have been a pile of bodies by now, while, so far, the only casualty in all of this was an earlier version of Beatrice, my beloved Amanda. Will it suffice, I wonder, the idea that Beatrice could not have died? Will it suffice I wonder, the notion that the crack in time had now widened to encompass another of these wild valleys, and that the story of what was becoming had claimed another apparently willing participant, a most unlikely actress, but one who seemed compelled to learn her lines as the story unfolded around us? And will it suffice that when I finally went back inside the house, it was to find a woman with a knife in her hand.

## Chapter 24

### Not a touching game

You must forgive the crude device. I do not mean to be insulting. Stories are inadequate vehicles for conveying accounts such as this, for an inner truth seems always to defy the normal convention of conflict and resolution, as demanded by the various dry theories of fictional construction. Anyway, it was not the knife I found most chilling - that was just an ordinary kitchen knife: it was more the woman herself, for whom anything might have been said,... except ordinary.

Meeting a stranger for the first time is possibly one of the purest exchanges that can occur between souls - free of preconception and prejudice, but from that point on our perception becomes clouded. It becomes a mixture of truth and fiction. Our potential to learn more is increasingly hampered by our inability to read minds and our propensity for filling in the gaps with our misconceptions. Already my ideas about this woman were under the threat of corruption by what I had been told,... *she's not the full shilling, she's a simpleton, she's aggressive and possibly dangerous.* But I resisted the offer of this crude persona because, I told myself, it was irrelevant here. I told myself I was not interested in knowing the actress, no matter how fragile she might be, but in understanding the role she played.

She was dark haired, and around thirty years old, at a guess, perhaps thirty five, but possessed of an alarming innocence and a truly extraordinary beauty: tall, slim waist, voluptuous bosom. It was easy to understand how a shallow and unscrupulous man might seek to amuse himself with a creature such as this. She was a blank slate, a generic beauty, the finest of God's female manifestations, but apparently lacking the sophistication and the emotional complexity that comes with adulthood. What strange archetype was this? My immediate reaction was a mixture of compassion and base arousal, which then flipped almost in the same breath and had me recoiling from her with an inexplicable revulsion.

She was weeping silent tears on account of the onion she was carefully dicing. There was also a large piece of meat awaiting the same procedure, prior to immersion in the casserole she was preparing. Of course, there was an impossible conflict here. One the one hand was the suddenness of her appearance, and on the other the sweetly domestic scene in which I had discovered her, to say nothing of the fact that she was a complete stranger, preparing a meal, uninvited, in my own kitchen. The premise was so bizarre my mind attempted to reject it, but there is nothing like the facts of a situation for bringing out the pragmatic side of human nature. And there was also a strange Englishness about my approach, for such a thing does exist,... that no matter how peculiar and trying the circumstances, we English do seem less inclined than others to make a fuss, and more inclined to find a balance whereby complete misfits can rub along quietly and get the job done.

She did not waste as much energy in her appraisal of me, but lowered her eyes, as if to ignore my presence before continuing with the dicing of her onion - except of course it was my onion: I had purchased it from the supermarket in Bowness only yesterday, along with the meat. Also, I should say the knife was not entirely innocent in its purpose: so long as I remained in the doorway, the knife was content to go about its ordinary business, but I had only to lift my foot, as if to take a step nearer for the knife to be raised in a gesture that managed to be both threatening and defensive.

I raised my palms, a gesture of openness, I hoped, a gesture of submission, a gesture of English pragmatism. Then I backed away and retired to the parlour. This was an improvement, I thought, for I recall the last time I had actually run from her, unable to deal with her presence at all. I sat at the desk, head in hands, wondering what on earth I was supposed to do now,... when my elbow nudged the Changes. Okay then:

*Q: What on earth must I do now?*

*A: Think of this situation as a ritual vessel, a melting pot, a cooking pot. You must abandon all artifice, sacrifice all ambition, all sense of having a say in matters, then the necessary connections will be made and what is correct will unfold of its own accord.*

*You are connected.*

*Things resonate.*

*Surroundings respond to your presence,...*

*But do not let this affect the contents of your heart, or the offering will be spoiled and the connections broken.*

I heard the casserole going into the oven, and for the rest of the afternoon the house was filled with the delicious smell of steak and onions as they bubbled away. It seemed a curious metaphor of the situation, exactly as described by The Changes - curious but apt - circumstances unfolding in accordance with the same rules as those governing the turn of my thoughts, and of course the turn of The Changes themselves. Their counsel was to remain empty of all supposition, so the casserole might continue its mysterious maturation without danger of contamination. This was not a mystery to be uncovered, but one to be experienced and recounted - an experience that required me only to bear witness. It was a potent brew. My head swam, and my mouth watered in a way that did not seem altogether decent.

In order to escape the aroma of the melting pot, I made my way out into the sunshine, then found myself drawn to the cabin and the wardrobe, wherein I discovered a last reminder of Amanda Fleetwood,... a suit of pale blue and a blouse of ivory silk. But they were mouldy and decaying - mouldy underwear and a pair of mouldy shoes. The sight of these things filled me with horror and served as a reminder that only our dreams are incorruptible,... unlike flesh and all the finest weavings of mankind. We come into life with nothing and all we

leave behind turns to dust and slime. How then can we value life so much, when it is so fleeting, and the result of all our labours so irrelevant,... so insulting of our aspirations?

I took a hoe from the cabin and began to work the soil in the front garden, but the borders were thick with weed, the soil tangled and heavy. It would take years - years of mulch and labour and the ponderous process of worms and weather in order to render it black and rich and friable again, but I laboured on, slowly, seeing nothing but the earth, taking in its musty-sweet scent and occasionally eyeing the bricks of the house, wondering if it would be kind to me - wondering if it would see me snug through the winter.

Then she appeared in the doorway and I realised of course it was not just me who would be wintering here,... it would be the two of us! She had left the knife behind and was standing, looking at me quite openly, as if wondering what I was going to do next. I paused and leaned upon the hoe. For a child, she possessed an unusual degree of refinement in her posture - it was the clothes of course, and the way she wore them, the way she projected something other than herself through them.

"Joshua?"

Her voice carried easily. It was deeper than I had expected and it had a nervous energy behind it, wavering between fear and query.

"Joshua is a game," I replied. "I can play Joshua if you want me to."

"A game?"

"Like chess. Can you play chess?"

She shook her head. "Is Joshua a game like Beatrice?"

"Yes. Joshua and Beatrice. It's the same game,..."

"I don't like games. They make me tired, and I always lose, because I'm not like other people."

"Joshua and Beatrice isn't a game for other people. Only you and I can play it."

"It's a dressing up game?"

"Yes. But it's a game of becoming as well."

"Becoming?"

"Yes. We each become someone else. You become Beatrice, and I become Joshua."

"I'm already Beatrice."

"I know. You can play on your own, or I can play with you. It's for you to decide. Do you want to go on playing on your own?"

"I can't decide. People always want to make me choose. But I don't want to

choose. You choose. Will you play with me or not?"

"Yes. I'll play with you."

"You must not touch me. Do you promise? This cannot be a touching game."

"I promise."

"And you must never come between me and the way out."

"Please explain that."

"The way outside, from the inside. Don't come between me and the door. Do you promise?"

"Does it bother you? Being inside?"

"Sometimes. But I can manage here, as long as no one comes between me and the door."

"I understand. I will try to remember."

"And you must never lock a door, so that I can always get out if I need to, without turning a key."

"I promise."

"No keys. Keys are for secrets, and I don't like secrets."

"Is it all right if I lock my bedroom door when I'm asleep?"

"I don't like secrets," she repeated.

"I think I'd be afraid of you if my door wasn't locked."

"I promise I won't come to you. I won't play touching games."

Could I trust her that much? Was it not safer just to promise in order to appease her and then lock it anyway? I suspected not. A promise to this woman would always be a cross your heart and hope to die sort of promise.

"Very well. No secrets. No keys."

She appeared satisfied. "Tea will be ready in half an hour. You must wash your hands."

"I will. Thank you, Beatrice."

I came into the kitchen, and sat down at the table, being careful to allow her the freedom to escape if she wished. The table was set with neat precision, and she had changed from her tweeds into a lighter frock which she wore with gold earrings and a delicate gold locket around her neck. We faced each other across the longer dimension of the rectangular table, well out of arms reach, and we ate. All the time I was conscious of observing her for signs of something childlike and empty in her gestures, in her mannerisms, but there were none. Indeed she held herself with Edwardian refinement, and ate with the manners of a Queen. The only evidence of her affliction came when she spoke - and it was not an affliction exactly, more simply a curious strangeness.

"Thank you, Beatrice. This is an excellent meal."

"I can cook," she replied.

"Have you been here all summer?"

"That's not part of the game," she warned. "You can't ask me anything that's not part of the game."

"I'm sorry. Can you tell me,... about us, about Beatrice and Joshua. I last played this game with another lady, long ago, a lady who's dead now,... Joshua was friends with Beatrice in those days. Then he went away, and Beatrice missed him very much. Can you tell me, what is Joshua to Beatrice now?"

"You've come back to me, " she said, simply, and then, after a moment's thought: "Why did you go away?"

"The lady who played Beatrice wanted me to go. It was part of the game in those days. Joshua had to go to fight a war, so Beatrice could be sad and lonely for him."

"Did Joshua want to go?"

"No. It broke his heart."

"Then he should be happy now."

"Happy?"

"That we are together again."

"Of course,... yes. Joshua should be happy,... is happy."

It is a side effect of Ghita's teachings that one is rendered defenceless in the face of one's own sadness. Tears come from the deeper self, from the unconscious, but they can be blocked by Ego, a skill that men are particularly good at perfecting, so that by the age of forty one might even be unable to remember the last time one wept. It was a more important skill, however, to teach one's ego to respect the unconscious and its need to express itself, and so it was I began to feel the tears rising in me now and did nothing to prevent them. The trigger, I think, was that I detected so little emotion in her. Though her language was stilted, she spoke with perfect poise, perfect calm, as if her way of talking was the most natural in the world and because of that I felt all the more alone. How I missed Beatrice!... missed the memory of our touching game!

The tears came, swelling my eyes and spilling hot. I covered my face and began to weep it out. The first time this had happened, Ghita had held me. It was a frightening experience because I had no idea what it was I could possibly be so upset about, the tears spilling from a seemingly bottomless well of emotion.

*"Every slight, my love," she'd said. "Every hurt you've ever swallowed, every*

*disappointment,... your whole life. Stand aside now and let it come."*

It was the memory of Ghita's touch, and the rhythm of her rocking that saw me through this now and helped me to empty the well. I discovered it was pretty full and the process took a while. In the meantime, I was aware of Beatrice watching and I was afraid of how she might react, being apparently void of emotion herself. She did not move, nor of course venture to offer me a comforting hand, but when I was finally able to dry my tears, I saw her looking down into her lap, not embarrassed, but holding back tears of her own,.... genuine tears.

"I'm sorry," I said. "This is not an easy game to play."

"I would not have played the game like that," she said. "I would not have sent Joshua away if I'd known it would make him so sad. I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Joshua's sad because she's dead,..."

"Beatrice isn't dead," she replied with calm conviction. "So there's no need for you to be sad."

"Of course." I smiled.

Still, she looked at me with red rimmed eyes. "I will not make you sad again, Joshua."

"It wasn't your fault - please don't cry. There's no need."

"Do you forgive me for sending you away?"

"Yes,... yes of course!"

"Does it mean I will die too? Because I play Beatrice now?"

"No,... you mustn't think that. That's outside of the game. Let's not talk about it any more."

I made to get up, to escape perhaps, for the atmosphere had become overpowering, but she sprang back, flinging the chair aside. It was an animal-like reaction, swift and instinctive. My God, she *was* damaged! I showed her my palms at once and sank back down. "I didn't mean to startle you. Can I clear the things for you, and wash up perhaps?"

She shook her head, agitated and panting. "No. Beatrice washes up. She cooks and cleans, and mends clothes. Joshua must mend the house and keep the garden nice,... and chop wood for the stove."

"Wood? Yes,... yes,... I'll go and chop some wood, shall I?"

"If you like."

I found my feet but blundered into her line of escape once more which caused her to grip the table in panic. I circled back slowly, remembering this time to put her between me and the nearest door. In doing this I had to come very

close to her, close enough to catch her scent and her heat - but this was apparently acceptable, so long as we did not actually touch and she felt able to run.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I will not hurt you. Never. Ever."

She lowered her head, as if to avoid an accident, then swivelled her eyes away from me. "I'm not afraid," she said. "You seem a gentle of man. I didn't mean to jump so. Sometimes, I can't help it."

"I'll chop some wood then."

"And I'll make you a cup of tea."

I stepped out into the cool of that evening like a man stepping out of a tiny, airless space. I could smell the hills, smell the coming of rain, smell the Scots Pine upon the fell, and the sweetness of the wood as I split it with the axe. Beside the woodshed, there was a pile of logs as tall as a man. I had no idea where it came from, nor where I could get more when it ran out. Nor did I know where the food came from after the supplies I'd brought had gone,... but these were practical details that did not belong in the world of dreams, so I ignored them,... left them to fate, to chance,... like everything else.

She brought tea, left it quietly on the windowsill, then made eye-contact as if seeking confirmation that I knew it was there, before slipping back inside. She was perfect, I thought - even her timid manners lending her an air of refreshing delicacy. It seemed impossible to me that she could be completely empty,.. there was a soul in there, a psyche of unknown complexity that the energy of Beatrice had felt able to enter. And it was a soul, a psyche, capable of tears, capable of pain.

I drank her tea. It was sweet and refreshing. And again I asked myself: What was the meaning of her? Meanwhile, mindlessly, I split the wood, gathered it into manageable armfuls, then stacked it neatly in the woodshed - thicker pieces for burning on the left, finer for kindling on the right. I stacked it with fastidious care, the pieces chosen for their similar girth so they piled up in neat courses. There was no need for such precision of course, no need to replenish the wood stock to such a degree in one evening either - I simply did it for the time it allowed me to remain outdoors,... not thinking, but opening my mind to the play of thoughts - which is not the same thing as thinking at all.

Opening the mind's stream is like dreaming, or like reading The Changes: everything we are presented with is an image that relates directly to our situation. Sometimes we are shown what our situation is, and sometimes what it is not. But the mind's stream is never trivial, and to wade into it is to feel the current of the cosmos as it washed against our being. To daydream then is to contemplate the divine.

As I chopped wood, I was reminded of the myth of the sculptor, Pygmalion who was not well disposed towards the fairer sex because of what he

perceived to be their imperfections. Pygmalion ignored the real women of his acquaintance and instead concentrated on creating a statue to represent his ideal of feminine perfection. Then he fell in love with the statue and prayed to Aphrodite that it might become real, a self created lover,... a wish that Aphrodite granted him and his statue of perfection came to life in the embodiment of the womanhood Galatea, who awoke to Pygmalion's caress and knew him at once as her lover. Or so the story goes, and certain versions leave it there, with Pygmalion viewed in a very positive light, as a man who rejected the imperfection of mortal women, in pursuit of his art, his muse, his anima.

But in another version of the story, Pygmalion actually turns out to have been a bit of an idiot for having rejected the charms of real women, an opinion shared by Aphrodite, and it was for this reason his statue was brought to life, physically perfect, but utterly void of anything else, a soulless mirror image of Pygmalion's own vapid projections. Galatea was Pygmalion's comeuppance, not his reward.

I remembered visiting the art gallery in Birmingham, years ago and seeing the Pygmalion myth as a series of four paintings by the Victorian artist Burne-Jones, the last one capturing Galatea's physical perfection, and her heart of stone, in quite a chilling manner. Then I experienced a serendipitous shift and was reminded of the Victorian art critic Ruskin whose home on Coniston Water lay not a million miles away from me that evening. The myth that clings to Ruskin is that he was a man so caught up with the ideal of female perfection the sight of his wife's all too authentic anatomy on their wedding night sent him into such a profound shock, their union remained forever unconsummated. In the end his poor wife took up with the artist Millais who'd been commissioned to paint Ruskin's portrait, a fact which seemed to show that the archetype of Aphrodite was alive and well in our collective unconscious, punishing Ruskin, like Pygmalion, for favouring the ideal as opposed to the perfectly lovely reality that was offered to him.

That seemed to be the lesson here as well with this inhuman Beatrice,... and yet it so clearly *wasn't*! Had I been the shallow heel who'd tried it on with this vulnerable child-woman, then I could have seen the re-enactment of my personal version of this myth, and Aphrodite's revenge in my castration. But Beatrice was not my personal invention,... she was not my muse,... not my anima,.. my goddess.

Beatrice was not a woman, but a pattern of creative energy, entirely autonomous, and it had now entered the mind of a child. It had finished with physical love perhaps. Aphrodite played no part here. This Beatrice wanted no more touching, no more tortured dialogue - for the host she had chosen could express herself in only the simplest of ways. None of this was a projection of male fantasy, nor a rejection of female imperfection in favour of the male psychological imprint, the anima,... projected onto a physically perfect but otherwise hollow female shell. But there was something unmistakably

Galatean about this woman: her stunning beauty somehow insulting of my maleness, if only on account of her apparently prepubescent innocence. Perhaps there was an archetype that explained this, for there is nothing new under the sun, but for the life of me I could not see it then.

## Chapter 25

## The innocence of the child-woman

I chopped wood until after dark, and my neck burned with midge-bites. She had left a light on the landing, a lamp turned low, and this provided sufficient transparency for me to pick a way through the kitchen and find the stairs. She was aware of me as I climbed - I don't know how I knew this, but I pictured her consciousness, and she was sensitive to my approach, as I was sensitive to it - sensitive also to the deception that had begun to form in my mind - that I would quietly slide the bolt on my door, so she could not hear it. But as she was already aware of my betrayal I felt ashamed, so that when I finally retired, I not only left my door unlocked but also slightly ajar in the hope that I could regain some of her trust, and forgiveness.

And then I slept.

But there must have been a darkness to my thoughts for I was at once plunged into a doubly dark dream, a dream in which I had been arrested by Constable Ellen McBride who'd stripped me of my clothes, so that I sat on a cold, metal chair in a foul, black-bricked cell while she asked me continually what I thought was real. There was no point to her question and yet she promised my reward for a correct answer would not only be my freedom but also the return of my private parts which she said she kept in a pot on her desk for safekeeping.

I'm not familiar with the psychology of male castration fantasies, but it was enough to wake me with a jolt and have me checking that all was in order. As Cragside dreams go, I'd been let off lightly, for even as I'd dreamed this scene, I'd been aware of dreaming, aware of the fiction, of the allegory - and I'd searched my heart for what it might mean, what particular blackness lay lurking inside of me.

Was it my lack of trust? Was it my fear inspired by Ellen's tale. In pitch dark, I touched my fingers to my temple and opened my palms,... supplication, remorse, emptying,... and then settled back down to reap my dreams again: It was a boat this time, a barge, a sailing ship,... travelling a wide canal,.... a waterway, a river, a stream, life's stream,... Tao, the way,... destiny. I was proud of my vessel, proud of its sleekness and its beauty. But I was not travelling alone. Beatrice was there also, doing domestic chores which included hanging washing on the rigging. I looked up into the rigging to see clothes flapping in the wind, complicated clothes, shirts and trousers and knickers and corsets,... all with a profusion of seemingly superfluous straps and buckles and ribbons - and likewise the clothes themselves seemed to overcomplicate the vessel, sapping the wind from its sails so that we no longer sped along the waterway, but came almost to a halt.

"Don't hang out the washing," I told her but she snarled at me, then quoted a Masefield poem about downing to the sea, and the wind like a whetted knife. I was surprised because I'd thought her such a simple creature, and it seemed so unlikely she'd have the brains to remember even a line of poetry, let alone several verses. Then I felt guilty for so belittling her intellect, and I reminded myself that I was not exactly so smart myself or I would know whether I was sailing upstream or downstream.

In order to check my progress I began lowering a line into the water, thinking I would be able to detect the tug of the current, and so set my course accordingly, but as I did so, another boat came into view, a rowing boat with two men in Edwardian costume at the oars - Lamarr and D.I. Planer. Lamarr's clothes were too big for him, his straw coloured suit flopping and gaping, as if he were a child in a man's attire, while Planer's clothes were so small he could not move without tearing the seams. They doffed their hats with ludicrous politeness and then pulled away upstream. In the stern of the boat sat Ellen McBride, her fingers trailing lazily in the water. She cast me a doe eyed look that made me feel like I was in love with her and that I wanted to swap her for Beatrice. Then Beatrice appeared beside her,.. the two of them gazing at me from the stern of the boat. They sat side by side, arms linked, a sisterly, or dare I say even a Sapphic something or other between them and I felt I could no longer have either.

*"You're underestimating her," said the dream.*

*"But I'm not estimating her at all! I'm merely waiting to be shown the measure of her, the purpose of her."*

*"And so I'm showing you," said the dream.*

*"But showing me what? That she's making my journey more complicated? Slowing me down?"*

*"No," said the dream, "Only that you're underestimating her."*

*"So what do I read into Lamarr and Planer, then?"*

*"Lamarr's clothes are too big for him. Planer's don't fit at all. All four of them in the same boat,... in the same boat,... pulling in the opposite direction."*

*"And Beatrice and Ellen?"*

*"Hmn,... complicated," said the dream.*

Or so I wrote in my dream-book in the first feeble light of dawn. Then I came down to the kitchen to find eggs bubbling gently in the pan, and Beatrice in a dressing gown, hanging washing from the maiden over the range - corsets and long knickers and lots of seemingly superfluous straps.

"It's a bad-drying day," she said.

I opened the back door, to be greeted by a still Lakeland morning and a mist so thick I could not even see the woodshed. There was a leaden tint to it as

well that promised nothing but rain. "It's a bad day all right. But it smells good."

"Smells cold on my feet, Joshua. Shut the door will you?"

"Hmm?" I was thinking of Ellen, and wondering what the chances were of the weather clearing. It would be a difficult walk over to her place in mist as thick as this, I thought.

The dream clung to me, made me feel irritable,... troubled.

"The door, Joshua. It's cold."

"Of course. I'm sorry."

Could I be thinking of escaping so soon? I had a winter to face, probably many, for this was it, this was what everything had been pointing to: me and this strange creature, sharing the cottage gloom with the scent of wood-smoke and damp cotton.

I was underestimating her? I considered her incapable of something perhaps? The image of the stone Galatea came to me again,... the dumb Pygmalion embracing her, his head resting upon her naked belly, her sightless eyes gazing past him without seeing. It troubled me that Pygmalion could not feel how cold her belly was, marble-ice, and barren,... while he was imagining its luscious heat,...

"You look very lovely, Beatrice," I said, for there was indeed something lovely and vulnerable about her in her long night-clothes, but I admit they were nervous words, words to fill the silence between us. She ducked her head and swivelled her eyes away as if to dodge them, as if the words embarrassed her. You could compliment a little girl on her clothes and her appearance and she would take it as being kindly meant,... nothing more. Was she not so innocent then? Did she understand the meaning of flirting and foreplay? Did she think my words were the opening gambit of a touching game?

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I was just being honest. You do look very lovely."

"And you look tired and old and fat," she replied. "And you haven't shaved. And you smell."

"I do?"

"And you have blisters on your hands and the midges have bitten your neck."

"Yes,..."

It seemed incredible, but I realised she was sulking, head bent, pouting, eyes accusing. "Serves you right! You stayed out all evening cutting wood, like you didn't want to be with me. Why go to all the trouble of coming back if you don't want to be with me Joshua?"

I was searching for a defence when I realised of course she had a good point. I

had spent all evening outside with myself for company, when my aim had been to spend my time with Beatrice, to close with her, to understand who or what she was. "I'm sorry. I was afraid of you,..."

"How can you be afraid when you know me so well?"

"Things I've heard,... outside of the game,... we needn't talk about them."

"Like how I cut a man?"

"Yes,..."

"Like how I walk the hills at night with no clothes on?"

"Em,.. well, I haven't heard that."

Except of course I had,.... and not from Ellen McBride but from an experience altogether first hand, yet like a dream, like viewing the details of a past life through a murky window.

*You've forgotten what they say about me? That I'm not quite sane? That I've had too many lovers, even for someone of my age? That I walk the fells naked by moonlight and lure travellers to my lonely house, where I keep them imprisoned for weeks and make love to them? That I might carry myself like a sophisticated lady, but underneath I'm nothing more than a simpleton? The brainless love-child of country blood that lies too close?*

How those words echoed now! But we'd made them up - Amanda and Matthew, a decade ago, spinning and ad-libbing the story of Joshua and Beatrice!

"I was lonely," she went on. "I wanted Joshua to sit with me,... and tell me stories - just for a little while. That's all."

"Then I shall. Tonight. We'll sit in the parlour, light the fire,... and I'll tell you stories,... if it pleases you."

"All right,..."

She was still averting her eyes, but I detected the faintest sliver of a smile - genuine happiness perhaps, or was it guile?

"I'll go back up, draw a bath,... and shave,.... I know I'm putting on a little weight, but the fells should soon get rid of that - I plan to get out walking most days,... if that's all right."

She nodded. "So long as you come back to me. And sometimes I might walk with you, if that's all right. I like to walk - I'm not as weak in my legs as I am in my head. I won't slow you down."

"Of course. I'd be glad of your company."

I found myself brushing away tears once more,... her words squeezing out a memory that predated my earliest knowledge of this place, the memory of a young man drawn to the mountains and to long walks, quite mysterious to him

then in the power of their allure, and the dream of a place that held him in the bosom of the fells, and to a woman whose hair smelled of heather and fern to welcome him back each time. It was a fantasy, a poem scribbled on the back of a beer-mat, a drawing in an exercise book, a feeling of love with no object. Until now perhaps.

"I've always known you, haven't I?" I said, not expecting her to answer, but she nodded anyway. Perhaps, I told myself, it was only what she thought I wanted to hear. "All my life I've dreamed of coming home to someone. And you are she. Beatrice,... you are the one."

"Yes, Joshua."

If only I could believe her, I thought. If only she were flesh and blood, and not made of stone. But what was I saying? She was not made of stone! No iced marble for her belly. Indeed I sensed a curious warmth,...

Fernlea nestled at the head of Greendale, a lone valley to the east of Drummaurdale. My route led up the steep fell-side via an ancient pony route that zigzagged gently all the way to the ridge, then another that zigzagged gently down the other side. None of the paths hereabouts were well used, but this one even less so, and as usual I met no one.

Leaving Cragside in the late afternoon the weather had improved a little but the top third of the fell still lay undercover - a heavy mist torn around the edges by a stiff wind, but otherwise it seemed reluctant to budge. I entered it with a sense of foreboding. Mist can be a killer if you have not the sense to hunker down while it passes. Mist plays tricks with one's mind, presenting images of a landscape that does not exist. It can create the impression of a mountain range some miles distant, when in fact what one really sees is a faint undulation in the path, no more than a few yards away. One moment you are confused by this strange monstrosity rearing its head, and causing you to doubt your bearings, and then you are almost tripping over it - or it can have you veering off course heading for what you're certain is the summit of your destination, only to have you leave the ridge too soon, and step off into air. Reality becomes a mixture of material fact and imagination.

The broad back of the fell was marked by a large, tumbled cairn, like the tumulus of a mighty warrior. Seeing it, I knew I was still on course and that the descent now lay ahead of me, but I confused the scale of the cairn, thinking it was larger and more distant, when in fact it was small and I was almost on top of it. This momentary confusion lent an added edge to what happened next for I swear a figure unfolded from the cairn - a cloaked woman:

*Beatrice!*

She rose suddenly, fixing me with a stare as she threw open the cloak, like an eagle's wing. My dark haired, dark eyed Beatrice. Except it *was* an eagle,... huge,.... its terrifying presence making me fall back while it rose into the mist,

leaving me crouching, head on my knees, heart pounding.

I had never seen an eagle before, though I was aware the Lakeland valleys were once again becoming home to these magnificent creatures. But,its behaviour was out of character, sitting on a cairn in the mist, and then there had been the play of my thoughts before encountering it and the intermingling of imagination and reality - in other parlance, a vision. It had the flavour of a synchronicity, and something in Beatrice's expression chilled me.

It had been a look of disapproval. I was playing the game wrong somehow, thinking about things the wrong way, thinking of the child-woman the wrong way. Time and again my intuitions told me she was not empty. She was *not* Galatea, not the stone-like useless beauty I had begun to construct. I sat a while in the mist and tried to think what it was she possessed that I had missed, what it was I was being urged to reconsider, urged to recognise as the single crucial fact of her existence, and her presence here. Of course it was simple:

It was her innocence!

How many times had Ghita told me that we do not see the world at all unless it be through the eyes of a child?

## Chapter 26

## Cousin Charlotte

Fernlea Cottage was a lone, squat little place, very much in need of renovation. It lay at the end of a narrow valley road which, this far up, was just a dirt track and therefore pretty much in keeping with the exterior of the place which was definitely nineteenth century. However, her vehicle was parked nearby, and so I found myself averting my eyes in order that it did not spoil my sense of being out of time.

Ellen McBride received me at the door wearing a beautiful dress of embroidered white cotton. It was so clearly of the period, and so perfect that it took my breath away, a thing she was not slow to notice.

"You like it?"

"It's stunning. Where do you get all these costumes from?"

"That's my secret. Come inside. I'll make tea. You look pale,... perhaps you shouldn't be out in this weather, I mean a man of your age! I wasn't really expecting you to make it today."

"I'm fine - just a little out of condition."

Unlike Cragside, Fernlea's interior had not been preserved in the Late Victorian or Edwardian style. Instead it had undergone decades of ad-hoc decoration, one layer on top of the other, ending sometime in the nineteen seventies, so that its tatty gaudiness was an affront to the refined beauty of the dress she wore. The boards were bare, and had a dull sheen about them that suggested the house was not beyond redemption - she had obviously gone to the trouble of removing the old carpet so it did not spoil things, and I was flattered she had taken the trouble.

"I know, it's horrible isn't it?" she said. "The rent's cheap though,... and I am very much alone out here, which is what you wanted for me, isn't it?"

"Did I say that was what I wanted?"

"Yes,... you did."

"Then I suppose I must have wanted it. I really can't remember. It seems there's so little I actually do want these days."

We settled down with tea in the lounge, a man and a woman out of time, thrust forward to an age of poor taste that was already past,...

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Hn?"

*What is the difference between truth and delusion, Ghita?*

*Truth and delusion, my love? The former affirms the totality of existence, the latter negates it.*

*The totality, Ghita?*

*The totality of every living being, all things viewed as coming together, like a finely woven tapestry, a tapestry of infinite length but consisting of a single thread, a thread that runs through everyone and everything. Any act that seeks to preserve the thread in its unbroken state, affirms the interconnection of all things, and is good. Anything that would break the thread, severs the whole and is wrong.*

There was a thread hanging from the hem of her dress, looping down to brush the purple gaudiness of the worn-out carpet.

"Mr Rowan? Shall I call an ambulance?"

"I sincerely hope you have not the means about your person, Ms McBride, nor in the house. I should hate to be disturbed by the ringing of a telephone."

"Rest easy, grandfather - the twenty first century will not intrude. More tea?"

"Em,... no, thank you. Ms McBride, I wonder if I could beg of you a professional confidence."

"I doubt it." she replied. "But try me anyway, I might be feeling generous."

"You said that when Beatrice,... I mean Amanda Fleetwood,... was found at Drummaur tarn - when you found her - she was in a state of undress,...."

"You mean naked? Yes she was."

"I was wondering if you noticed anything about her - something unusual, an unusual mark on her body."

"A mark?"

"Yes,... she had a very distinctive mark on her body,... a decoration,.. I'm certain you would have noticed it."

She search her memory, looking aside, trying to avoid my eyes which I rested upon her, fancying I was channelling all my energy towards her as if to burn a hole in her skull. She was lost for a moment, then seemed to grow wise to my intentions. "Why am I getting the feeling you're testing me, Mr Rowan?"

"Things don't fit, that's all."

"In what way don't they fit?"

"There is a taste of insincerity,... a bitterness, like almonds,... like cyanide."

"That's not what you said yesterday."

"I've slept since then."

"You locked your door, I hope!"

"No. I kept it ajar,... Beatrice needs my trust, you see? And right now I'm

more inclined to trust her than you."

"You really know how to insult someone."

You might think I spoke foolishly and certainly I could have been deluded, but something had seriously disturbed my equilibrium; last night's dream and my vision on the pass had both unnerved me.

"How do I know you're really a policewoman?" I said. "I've only seen you in uniform once, in Lamarr's office, along with the ridiculous D. I. Planer,... who could equally have been fake,... the three of you putting on a show for my benefit."

She might have taken such an accusation badly, but instead I detected a smile, half humour, half disbelief,... but there was a gentleness in it also, as if she were happy to go along with my stupidity - perhaps already she had come to expect this sort of thing.

"I see," she said. "But what would we have to gain from that?"

"I don't know."

"And if we're not who we say we are, then who do you think we might be?"

"Lamarr had a romantic interest in Beatrice, until he found her out. He resented her for that perhaps. And then there's her husband who she wanted to divorce - that could easily be Planer. And you?... you could be Planer's lover."

She thought about this for a moment, churning it over in all seriousness. "A potent mixture - a spurned lover, a husband, and a mistress,... but I don't see what we have to gain by frightening you into thinking you are on the State's most wanted list."

"It would make sense if Beatrice wasn't dead - if she'd been spirited away, perhaps to a mental hospital,... and her will,.... leaving me the house,... it was all fake,... you wanted me there, wanted to know who I was, what sort of threat I posed to your plans,..."

"I see,... then might I improve upon your conjecture by suggesting the possibility that we're all working for Beatrice,... the last Beatrice, Amanda, if you understand what I mean."

I hadn't considered that option and it made me pause. "Why would she have deceived me?"

"I don't know; this is your fantasy, not mine. Maybe Cragside was never hers. She just borrowed it for that one weekend, lending you the impression it had always been hers, that the real occupant, the real owner, the real Beatrice, is the one who lives there now!"

This panicked me a little and I felt the ground shifting under my feet. "But the letters,.... all we shared. I sent the letters to Cragside!"

"And perhaps they were answered by this woman, by this Beatrice. All you

shared, you shared with her. It's her you really love, not the Beatrice you think you love."

"Except,..."

"Except it's all rubbish, Mr Rowan. We're each of us exactly who we say we are and you're still grieving over her loss,... denying she's dead, thinking of any scenario, no matter how bizarre whereby she might have survived, that she might still be alive somewhere."

"You're right of course. I can see that, but for a moment I almost had myself going. Could it really not be true? Any of it?"

She came to me suddenly, knelt before me and placed her hand upon my lap. It was an uncommonly delicate little hand, so unlike her persona. "Listen," she said. "The woman you loved is dead. I found her. Fact."

"Fact to you, but through my eyes it's just something you're telling me, which could be either truth or lies."

"It's fortunate for you I'm not taking any of this seriously."

"No,... but you have begun to play the game, a little. This is good. Go on,..."

"The mark you're referring to - it was a coiled dragon, tattooed on her breast. I saw it and I remember thinking how much it must have stung to have it done. Now, does that help you to let her go?"

"No,... you could simply have asked Planer. He'd have known about the mark."

"Ah,... yes,... her husband, my lover." She shook her head in amazement. "Planer? My lover? Dear me,... It seems I've grown more desperate as I've grown older, but okay,... yes,... he could have told me, I suppose."

"Nothing you can say can convince me, you see?" I gave a sigh, feeling a shudder of ragged energy running up my spine. "You're right. It's just denial. I must get through it as best as I can, mustn't I?"

"Yes, you must. And if I may say so these mind games you play are a little frightening. You're beginning to sound paranoid - schizophrenic maybe. Do you ever hear voices?"

"Forgive me for not answering that one."

"Perhaps you shouldn't be living alone. Perhaps you should go back to your bookshop, to Ghita,... to reality. It's bad for you out here."

"You forget I'm not living alone."

"No,... of course." She gathered herself up and moved to the window. "But now it worries me what fantasies you're weaving around this woman, this other Beatrice. Remember she's just a child who happens to look like a tall, mature beauty with an enormous chest."

"She's not a child. I don't know how you came to know her, but you misread her. She merely possesses a rare innocence. And anyway, we don't intend touching one another."

"Ah, so you've spoken to her now. Perhaps you understand a bit better then, what you're dealing with."

"She's clearly troubled,..."

She gave an impatient sigh. "The mist is coming down really thick over the pass. Why don't you stay the night?"

"I can't. Beatrice will worry."

"Then I don't see how this will work. I don't see how I can take instruction from you if I feel you've always got one eye on the clock, anxious in case Beatrice should worry."

"You sound jealous of her."

"Rubbish."

"These are our circumstances. I will stay until seven thirty. Until then, I am with you,... but I sense your need. It's already like that of a lover,... I feel you drawing something out of me. I felt it yesterday. All I can give you are words, Ellen,... just words."

"And what else do you think I'd want from a man like you?"

"More than perhaps I can give."

"So it's just words, then: What words of wisdom can you offer me today, oh master?"

"Beware of belief."

"Beware? I thought the whole point was to believe in something. Now you're telling me to go back to the way I was? To believing in nothing?"

I was feeling decidedly jittery. Our game of free association had released emotions that threatened to swallow me. "Perhaps I'm not the best person for you in this. I don't really seem to be in control of myself these days. I may contaminate you."

"I thought we'd already established that you were the one for me. That fate bound us together."

"Yes,... yes we did establish that, didn't we,... or that we were meant for each other perhaps. All right, you want to believe in the irrational? Well, there's something you should know about belief. Belief can heal, but it can also kill. If I believed in the powers of black magic, it would render me vulnerable to the curses of its practitioners. Do you understand? If I believed in ghosts or in malevolent spirits, I would have died of fright long before now. I could easily allow myself to believe in such things, allow myself to believe in things even that I know are false, but I choose not to, and so I am immune."

"You're talking about the power of suggestion? You don't think I'm in control of my own mind, Mr. Rowan?"

"You want a demonstration? Very well? That's a very pretty pendant you're wearing. Would you take it off please?"

"So long as it's the only thing you want me to take off."

"Hold it out at arm's length, let the pearl dangle freely from its chain. See how it swings?"

"You're going to hypnotise me? Forget it, I'm told I'm a poor subject."

"This is nothing to do with hypnosis. I'm going to perform an experiment in telekinesis. You know what that is? I'm going to use the power of my mind to move the pearl."

"I don't believe in that sort of thing,..."

"Really? We'll see. All you have to do is concentrate on holding the pendant steady. Don't try to fight the motion, just try to keep your arm still, your muscles relaxed. Can you do that?"

"Okay." She didn't sound convinced but appeared to concentrate on steadying the pendant. Then the room grew quiet and both our minds concentrated upon the little pearl in its gold clasp while its oscillations ran down and down, and finally ceased.

"That's good,... You have a very steady hand. But now I shall imagine that the pendant is moving from left to right, and it shall do so. Do you understand? *It shall move from left to right*." I pretended to focus upon the pearl, furrowing my brow in a gesture of intense concentration and sure enough, after a little while the pendant began to swing. From left to right.

"How are you doing that?"

"No talking. Please concentrate on holding the pendant steady."

"I thought I was,..."

"Now I shall imagine the pendant is making little circular motions, round and round. Do you understand? *It shall go round and round*,..."

The pendant duly obeyed and the look on her face betrayed her shock.

"Nothing is what it seems," I said. "Rest assured I can no more move that pearl with my mind than I can move the chair you're sitting on."

"Then how?"

"You moved it. I'd only to put the idea into your head."

"But I really tried to hold it steady."

"I know you did,... but your conscious volition failed to overcome an unconscious motor effect."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. And for a moment there you thought I might really be capable of telekinesis. Did that frighten you?"

"All right,... yes it frightened me, but now I know it was a trick."

"Do you ever read your horoscope?"

"No,... they're rubbish."

"Believe in Tarot?"

"No."

"Ever had a gypsy tell your fortune?"

"When I was younger,..."

"Did it come true?"

"Well, yes, it did, but,... it was just a coincidence."

"What if she'd told you you were going to die before your fortieth birthday?"

"Don't joke, I'm not there yet."

"Why worry, if it's all nonsense?"

She grew quiet. I had begun to touch a few nerves and I could see her thinking. "It would be cruel. I would waste half my life worrying about something the rational side of me knew wasn't going to happen."

"Then you accept the potential of one's imagination? You accept it can turn against us? You accept it can be an agent of our own destruction?"

I could feel her attention clamped upon me now, her eyes wide and receptive, hanging on my every gesture. I felt it inflating me. I drew the energy right out of her and blew up the balloon of my own ego with it. I could have asked her to do anything now, and she would have done it. I had power over Ellen McBride! Is this what Ghita had to fight with each of her adoring students? For we would all have sold our last possession just to be near her,... every one of us!

"I accept it,..." she breathed.

"Please Ellen, don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're a teenage groupie and I'm some sort of pop idol."

She flared at the suggestion, looking daggers instead, which had the desired effect of deflating me at once.

"That's much better.

"What exactly are you driving at with this?" she asked.

"It's all in the mind. Everything we do, this thing we nurture. It does not cross the threshold of our minds and enter the world. The world enters us, not the other way round. I can show you how to go deeper inside yourself, so that you can escape the world at will, show you things inside yourself that will make you view the world in a radically different way. But the world will still be there, as it always was,.. only your view of it will have altered. What we nurture is not a power that can change lead into gold, but one that can make a calm mind sick with worry, or a sick mind calm again, or a calm mind bathed in light and uncanny joy. It all depends on how we approach it. Really all I'm trying to say is that we must never think bad things, or enquire after outcomes if we believe the answers might in any way be harmful to our sense of being. Remember, what we believe can kill as well as cure."

"Is that the reason for your little outburst of paranoia earlier? A belief in something?"

"Yes,... I follow my dreams,... I look for omens,... and something tells me that all is not as it seems in the tangible world. That my reading of the circumstances falls short of reality. The stage is set, my little nineteenth century fantasy,... but while I believe I am acting on the stage of the London Palladium, I may be in a different theatre altogether, in a different city,... a different country."

"You're going funny on me again."

"It could be that you share this deception with me, and are not one of its architects."

"That's good,... I think. Does it mean you trust me then?..."

"I believe you mean me no harm."

"Which isn't quite the same thing. There's just no getting near you is there?" She looked away, hiding something. "You stupid man,... of course I'd never harm you."

"You've harmed other men though."

"They deserved it!"

"I believe you."

"Am I in, then? Am I part of this game now?"

"Undoubtedly, I mean that's if you want to play."

"Do I get to call you Joshua?"

"First of all you must decide who Joshua is?"

She smiled as she had never smiled before, so that for the first time I saw how wide her lips were, how white her teeth. "But Joshua, don't you know me?" she said. "I'm Charlotte,..."

I was wrong footed by the swiftness of her reply: "Charlotte?"

"You loved me, long before Beatrice came and lured you away with her wild looks and her loose morals. We might have been married if it hadn't been for her. That's why I hate her, don't you see?" She gave a little shrug, then smoothed the pleats of her dress. "Is that okay, Mr. Rowan?"

I was too stunned by the idea to want to break out of it yet. "I loved you before her?"

"Oh yes,... though you've always tried to deny it. We're cousins you see, you and I,.. second cousins, I think, but still, there you are. Nature is sometimes funny like that, is it not? At least it gives you an excuse to come over and see me now and then,... Beatrice doesn't mind. I'm alone and needing conversation,... needing company, and in a sense, we are family , so how can she object?"

"Charlotte?"

"This is how you play isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me that you loved me before you loved her. Call me by my name, and tell me that you still love me."

"I'm not sure I can do that. I'm not sure if I can say I still love you. I did once,... yes, that's true, and I'm sorry I ever tried to deny it, Charlotte, sorry if I ever hurt you, but I'm with Beatrice now."

She sighed. "It's all right. Don't distress yourself. I'll always be here for you. If you could see your way to calling on me a little more, it would make me happy. Our love,... what we shared,... we can keep it a secret. No one need ever know,... and we need not speak of it again, but if you should ever need anything, *anything*, you know where you can get it."

"This is not a touching game."

"Well of course, whatever did you think I meant?"

I was lost now,... thinking only that I had loved her once,... that Beatrice had won me away. Beatrice was dangerous, exotic,... "Why would all of this be happening again?"

"But it isn't is it. We're making it up."

"I don't know. Are we?"

"I am. I've never heard of Charlotte."

"But she came out of your head."

"That's what I mean,... I just imagined her."

"Imagination responds to all sorts of things, Charlotte."

"No. Stop. This is going too far, now. Are you suggesting I might have been Charlotte in a past life or something?"

"Not necessarily. You might have been, I don't know. You made that link yourself. Or perhaps it comes from a past life not lived, one that should have been lived but wasn't. I really don't know about these things."

"Wait, wait. I'm losing touch with what's real now."

"Nothing. Nothing is real. We play this game inside our heads."

"It doesn't help, saying that. What I want is,...."

"What? What do you want, Ms McBride?"

"I want something real, something I can touch and feel. I feel so sexy in these clothes this evening. Teach me. Show me your,... what you call them? *Practises?* Just once. Let me feel that at least!"

She was suddenly breathless, panting, begging in a way that I could not altogether believe in. "You're too hungry, Charlotte. You're out of balance and pulling me with you. You must stop it. I cannot teach you the Practices."

"How do you know? We should do it once, then decide. I may have a knack for it."

"Yesterday you wanted my assurances that I wasn't just a psycho-babbling charlatan who wanted to put his hands up your skirt. Are you saying now that's the very thing you're asking me to do? There's no need to test me any more on this,... really."

"I'm not testing you. Who are we kidding? It always comes down to sex in the end between a man and a woman, doesn't it? All right,... then if you can't do it to Ellen, do it to Charlotte. Ellen's a cold, hard, frosty, damaged bitch anyway, and I don't blame you... Charlotte is better. Charlotte is warm and silly and sexy,... and she *wants* you to do it to her. All right, forget the fancy title, no fiddling about, just take out that thing that's swelling in your trousers right now and stick it into her. Just,... stop talking and DO IT!"

"It's not something you do to others,... it's,..."

"Oh,... for pity's sake. You're just playing with words. Words mean nothing! However you want to say it, just give me what I want from you. Isn't there a quotation about when a woman calls a man to her bed, he must go."

"It's from a movie: Zorba the Greek, I think,.. and not really appropriate here,..."

"Look, just this once, forget everything I've ever said to you,... and give me what I want! Be a man,... be a yang kind of man, instead of a girlie kind of man! And fuck me!"

This was an unusual situation. I have never had a woman suddenly make her desires so transparent, and I still did not believe she was sincere. This was Ellen McBride, and I half suspected that the moment I looked like caving in, she'd beat me to a pulp for daring to be so presumptuous.

But then I lost myself in her. The gaudy, worn out decor of the cottage disappeared and all I saw was Ellen McBride looking like a genteel lady, looking like a Charlotte! And I thought to myself it was such a little thing to do, such a brief and meaningless intimacy,... that of course I wanted to feel what it was like inside of her, to make love to that image, to that fantasy, to that dress,...

And I heard myself saying: "Very well."

"What?"

"As you wish. I will come to your bed. I will make love to you,... to Charlotte."

She seemed to hesitate then, as if I'd called her bluff, as if she'd suddenly woken from a trance and now did not quite know how to extricate herself.

"Have you changed your mind?"

"No,... no." She stroked her brow, as if to reassure herself she was not dreaming. I don't know what had happened, what strange psychology had caused us to follow this path, but in spite both our selves, it seemed there was no going back.

"I'll go up, then shall I? Give me five minutes?"

"Of course. Does this mean I can call you Ellen, now?"

"Don't push you luck, Mr. Rowan."

She went upstairs, and that, it seemed, was that.

## Chapter 28

## The meditation at Fernlea

Charlotte did not want Joshua to see her body, and though she had called him to her bed, she made sure she was under the covers of her inauthentic duvet, long before he made the climb to her bedroom. By then the dress was lifeless and folded neatly over the back of a chair. A bulky wardrobe from the 50's hung half open and as Joshua undressed he could see the tunic of a twenty first century policewoman hung within. All of this jarred upon him, making him feel ever more doubtful. She watched him, biting her lip as he made ready for her. The he stood a while, looking at her, his sex rudely awake, his heart straining against his ribs. His body was confident and apparently ready, but his conscience confused:

*Who was this woman?*

*"Don't do it," said Matthew.*

*"Tread carefully," cautioned Ghita.*

*"This is not a touching game," warned Beatrice.*

Joshua knew all of this, for he was not fully confined by his own time and was as puzzled by his circumstances now as the rest of us. He knew this woman might be Charlotte, or it might be the misanthropic creature otherwise known as Ellen McBride. Meanwhile Matthew looked at Ellen, and she at him, and both knew this was a cold thing to be doing, a thing that was not a function of their natural desires, and a thing that might damage them both, or at any rate be a thing quite useless in soothing the ache that troubled her. She knew it when she pulled the duvet aside for him, and he knew it by the way she averted her eyes, as if disgusted by the thought of what she was about to do with a man like him,... a man like Matthew Rowan,... a man like Joshua!

At the first touch of her, something changed, and Joshua sank back into the unconsciousness of Matthew Rowan, retreated in haste as his lover Charlotte retreated into the unconsciousness of Ellen McBride. And Ellen heaved, then wept. Matthew caught her and pulled her to him, a tangle of arms and legs and coolness and smoothness and the scratchiness of pubic hair and the awkward pokiness of a sex still eager but no longer required. He held her for a long time. And from the way she clung to him, he knew this was what she wanted, what she needed, and nothing more.

There was a small back bedroom at Fernlea. It had been emptied of furniture, stripped of paper and carpet, and contained only a circular rug with a porcelain dish in its centre. In the dish there sat a fat candle. It was here Ellen McBride had begun to explore herself, and it was here she later led me, here where we sat upon the carpet, unabashed in our nakedness, for by now we knew the feel of each other's skin, and we were neither of us children any

more. She possessed a taut, athletic body and slim, pointed breasts with dark tips. There was a generous shock of dark hair below a muscled belly and muscled thighs that I fancied might have cracked my spine like a dry twig, had she so desired. We sat upon the carpet, two lotuses, the candle between us,... all bareness and emptiness, and openness.

"Thank you for understanding," she said.

"I'm not sure I really understand,... only that you needed to touch someone."

"The reasons aren't important here, I suppose."

"Is it your job? Your exile? Do you miss your city?"

"It's all of those things, but mainly it's just loneliness. No family, no friends, no one to miss me. If I should die tomorrow, who would know? Who would care?"

"I would know it. I would care."

"But that doesn't mean much, since you don't exactly need me for anything."

"Do we have to be needed in a tangible way, in a clingy way, for it to be of importance? Must people be having sex night and day and exchanging text messages every five minutes before their relationships can be said to mean anything?"

"Some would say yes."

"Is it not enough to have someone feel warmth and compassion for you? to trust that it's there? to expect nothing and to feel that only warmth and compassion is required in return? that it need only be felt and not constantly expressed?"

"I'm not a very compassionate person, Mr. Rowan. And I wouldn't be with you now if I didn't think you had something that I needed."

"That's honest, at least."

"Still feel compassion for me?"

"Yes,... of course"

"Tell me your dick's not disappointed it didn't worm its way inside of me?"

"This isn't about sex, Ellen. Sex is for children, for teenagers. We're past all that. We've outgrown it."

This seemed to strike a chord. "Speak for yourself."

"When sex is all there is, you've got nothing. We're both old enough to know that. You know we could have made love,... we could still. I mean its such a little thing between experienced adults, but it would leave you feeling just as empty, just as lost. You need to find yourself, before sex means anything at all. Find yourself first, then sex can put you back in touch with where you came from."

"The Practices again? You like to keep rubbing my nose in that don't you? I can see you're right. But for me the question is very simple and it's this: How do you go on believing in yourself when you're alone and feeling like you might as well be dead?"

"It's an important question. I'm not sure I have the answer - only that life is never wasted. Nature does not create things that have no value, no meaning. The view of the world through your eyes is as important as the view through anyone else's."

"Even a killer's eye's? If you could only know the evil I've seen, Matthew!"

"I would suggest not a killer's eyes, nor anyone who harbours cruel thoughts. Cruelty goes against our nature."

"How can it be against nature? Nature is cruel. It's part of nature's design, all the cruelty and the suffering is built in."

"Nature seems that way, yes, but I said *our* nature,... not just nature. Our nature is different. We understand cruelty and have the ability to rise above it, to either choose a path of cruelty, or a path of compassion and harmony. The difference is that the path of cruelty holds us back, while the path of harmony takes us forward. You are not a cruel woman, Ellen McBride. Whatever you have been in your past, you are seeking harmony now."

"But we can never escape the fact that we're no better than beasts underneath, none of us."

"We came from beasts, but that was a long time ago, in our preconscious past. A beast obeys its instinct. We have a choice."

"Oh yes? Even as you speak that worm between your legs is waking up. What choice do you have in its risings?"

Sure enough, after being persuaded to go to sleep, my sex was indeed becoming alert again. "All right - most men have no control over the ups and downs of this thing, but we can exercise a degree of choice over what we do with it."

She smirked.

"I see you are unconvinced, " I said. "Let me show you something. I am sitting before a naked woman. I find most naked women sexually arousing - it's in the nature of most heterosexual men. Now, by your rules, the natural conclusion of such a thing is my pushing out the energy into you in the normal way. Then, with my needs satisfied this worm as you call it might go to sleep again. But I can also pull the energy in, away from you, and dispose of it that way."

"Go on then."

I closed my eyes and tensed the muscles of my sex, made a mental connection between them and the channel of my spine, then slid the energy up into my

brain. Imagination? Perhaps, but the experience was sufficiently real for my spine to tingle in the most deliciously erotic way. I shuddered a little. Then the energy swam in my head, a small orgasm that, in the company of a less sceptical partner might have been counted as the first rung on the ladder to cosmic oblivion.

I looked at her and my Ego was delighted to find she was amazed, her eyes wide and regarding my perfectly reposed sex.

"That's a useful trick. But it could just be your age. Show me how quickly can you get it back up again?"

Always, there was the humour, never very deep inside of her. Sometimes it could seem dark and cruel and needlessly self deprecating, but that was just her way. "Let's forget me," I said. There was a box of matches by the dish, so I took one and lit the candle. "Observe the flame, and breathe. Do as I do. Breathe in, slowly and deeply."

I watched her for a while as she fell into the rhythm of her breaths. How different she looked, this slight, dark haired woman, compared with the leather clad man of her everyday persona. An old pain, a pain carried for a long time can contort the body, change it, whither it away, but she was strong and had maintained her girlishness.

The house was growing cool as the day slipped into the early evening. There were goose bumps on her body, and I shivered a little, so I left her alone for a moment while I dressed, then returned with a blanket which I draped over her, to keep her warm.

"Ellen, may I touch you?"

She nodded her assent.

"There are parts of the human body we can imagine as centres of energy. The first you should become aware of is this one." I pressed my fingers into the firm flesh of her belly, at a point below the navel, where her dark curls rose naturally. "Here you must centre yourself. Try it: with each outward breath, try to feel your mind sinking down to here."

Then came the bone of her sex, my fingers resting within the nest of her curls. "Here is the centre of your sexuality. Sink your mind to here and you will feel a gradual arousal. Below here, I will not touch, but the point resides between your sex and your back way. Do you understand me? Concentrate upon these lower points and you will feel them vibrate, their nature is cool, and soft. They are the points that reflect our connection with the earth."

She shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"No,... go on."

I touched the base of her spine, the protuberance of her tailbone, then her

sacrum. She remained still throughout and trusting in a way that caused my ego to be troublesome. "This point is very powerful. In the practices, we use it to lift the sexual energy into the brain, like a pump."

Gently then, I traced the soft cleft of her back, as Ghita had once done with me - and the memory of her touch still informed my imagination and guided the energy. Her spine was upright and strong. I pressed lightly upon the hollow of her upper back, then the base of her skull which lay beneath her hair. Her hair was long, and dry, and each strand seemed held apart, as if by electricity.

"None of this is without risk, you understand? The energy flowing this way is very hot. It is Yang,... it rises to the brain. When the brain becomes too hot we become egotistical, paranoid, delusional perhaps - even psychotic over time. So we must learn to circulate the energy back, to cool it, to settle it at the centre of our being. Now touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth and let the energy flow down it, from between your eyes, down your throat, between your breasts, through your heart,... and back to here."

I concluded the circumnavigation of her body with my fingers once more upon her belly. "This way we can draw energy from the universe, from the world, but we do it safely, in a way that evens its temperature. We must be neither too hot, nor too cold, but always in balance. This will sound strange to you, I know."

She had not moved throughout.

"And how is my temperature?" she asked.

"You are too hot." Gently I touched her crown. "Here. You must practice bringing it back down to here. When you can visualise all these points, then the energy can be allowed to circulate freely, and you will find your natural balance. You will attain a greater clarity of mind, and a healthier body."

"Does my body please you?"

"Yes,... but I shall not possess it."

"You're a very strange man."

"Yes,... you are also a very strange woman. But I'm pleased that I know you."

I made to leave.

"You're going?"

"I must return to Beatrice, now."

"Will I see you again?"

"Of course. I'll come tomorrow. Same time."

"You don't mean to abandon me then?"

"How can I? We've only just begun."

"You don't think the effort will be wasted?"

"No,... but tell me, do you have any moral objections to self stimulation?"

"You ask the strangest questions, Matthew. I take it you're talking about,...." she gestured with her fingers over her mound. "It's useful in emergencies."

"I only ask because not all woman are comfortable with it, nor men for that matter. It will be necessary for you do it with me,... watching."

"You are also a very naughty man. You're going to show me how?"

"I'm assuming you already know how. Knowing how is half way to where we want to go. I can show you the rest of the way,... if that's where you want to be."

"You said you couldn't teach me the Practices."

"That was before this evening. And it seems we have already begun. I can teach you what I know, which isn't much, but it might help you to realise that only in one sense are each of us truly alone - that is the sense that we are essentially, each of us the same, the one being, experiencing life separately, as water is the same, but confined in rivers and lakes and ponds and puddles,... that although the question of our purpose cannot be put into words, it can sometimes be experienced,... it can sometimes be felt,... it might comfort you to know this."

"Can you not show me now! I feel so calm. Tomorrow seems so far away. Who knows how I'll feel then."

"No. The day is fading now. The house has grown cold. Yang changing to the Yin of evening. You should light a fire. Sleep. Think on what I've said."

It troubled me, the course we had embarked upon - troubled me because I was aware of the less worthy side of me becoming inflated by his power over a vulnerable woman. But in my awareness, was I not also taking steps to control it? And was not my ego more easily subdued these days than it had ever been at any point in my life? And as I stepped out into that brooding eve and tasted once more the wild air of the fells, was not my mind afloat with possibility? She had seemed so unlikely a choice at first, but now the fact of her presence seemed nothing short of a miracle.

So I left Ellen or Charlotte gazing upon the candle flame, and I huffed and puffed my way up the track into the darkening mist once more. I moved faster than I needed to, afraid of the coming darkness, afraid I would not make it over the pass in time. But as I came over the ridge and began dropping into Drummaurdale, out of the mist, I relaxed, then experienced a rare moment of abstract revelation.

An amber sun lit up the valley of dreams, kissing it with golden lips, and the grass glowed like warm velvet at my feet. I could not put my feelings into words upon seeing the valley thus laid out before me, and I knew it meant more than merely what I was looking at. It was love! A pure love - not for

Beatrice, not for Ellen McBride nor Min nor Amanda Fleetwood,... it was just love: giddy, teenaged, heart aching love, with neither focus nor hope of resolution. And it stopped me dead!

It was not Joshua feeling this, but neither was it entirely myself, Matthew Rowan, whoever he was! Who was I? At that moment, I was everything there was, looking at everything there is. And, at the centre of everything, there lay Cragside, like a small jewel, a delicate trinket, amid the verdant green and nestled below the gnarled, ancient form of Drummaur fell with its lode of dream-catching, dream-sharpening, psyche-shaping ore.

And Beatrice.

## Chapter 28

## The Dream-child

When I returned, she was in the parlour, knitting a pair of baby's bootees. The light was leaking from the house and already the fire was casting shadows around the room. I entered quickly, anxious that I did not block the door for too long, then she might have her means of escape,... but she seemed tranquil, and comfortable, only pausing to look up and smile briefly a welcome, before resuming her knitting. I sat opposite her, sinking into a comfortable armchair and stretching my feet towards the fireplace. There is no finer seducer, I thought, than an open fire.

The light caught a picture on the wall, a water-colour of Drummaur Tarn - it was old, its edges a little yellowed but the colours remained vibrant,... alive.

"It is a pretty picture," she said, following my gaze. "I've always liked it."

"Yes,... me too."

And seeing her pale face I was reminded of Galatea again, of Pygmalion's cold chiselled statue. Why did this haunt me so? Cold,... cold as chiselled stone, cold to touch, cold inside,... Was Galatea Yin or Yang? Stone is hard, unyielding, so she must be Yang,... but stone is also cold to touch, and therefore Yin. Was Galatea perhaps awaiting the first kiss, as Yang touches Yin? Was Beatrice merely Yinness gone to far, and frozen into stillness, into stone,... as Charlotte was too hot? And my, how hot Charlotte had felt!

"Have you walked far, Joshua?" asked Beatrice.

"Across into Greendale. To Fernlea. That's where my cousin lives,... my cousin Charlotte."

"Was it Charlotte who came to visit yesterday?"

"Yes,... yes it was."

"Charlotte looked very troubled, Joshua."

"Yes, she is. She's lonely,... and afraid."

Beatrice took a while to consider this, but her expression gave nothing of her thoughts away. "Is Charlotte part of the game then?"

"Yes,... I think so."

"Why is she afraid?"

"She's afraid to die,..."

"Is she ill?"

"No,... but most people are afraid to die. And some, when they're feeling sad

for other reasons, feel more afraid than usual."

"Why is she sad?"

"I don't know."

"Can you help her? Can you make her not afraid?"

"Yes."

"It would be a kindness then."

"A kindness, yes,... I suppose it would,... or at least when someone says they need something from you and it's in your power to give it, then it would be cruel not to. And we must always avoid being cruel to others."

She thought for a while, running my convoluted words through her head. "Yes,... that's what I said. A kindness." She thought some more. "Is the game you play with Charlotte,... a touching game?"

What was I to say? Clearly our own game was not a touching game, yet I felt awkward announcing a relationship with a woman, a relationship I did not entirely approve of,... or at least Matthew did not approve of it. "It may come to that," I said.

She caught her breath. "And then,... will Joshua leave me?"

That was easy to answer, both Matthew and Joshua leaping to their defence. "Joshua will never leave you. It's the other person that I am, outside of the game, who might have to touch Charlotte."

This was not exactly a lie, but it was a truth far from perfect. Matthew did not know, Charlotte and Beatrice was not slow to pick up on this.

"I thought you said Charlotte was part of the game."

"I did, didn't I. Things are still unfolding. Perhaps it might be better if Joshua does not touch Charlotte."

Beatrice gave a little smile and shook her head. "My, you do tie yourself in knots. Make the game simpler, so's I can understand it better. Let Charlotte be your mistress, if she's willing. I don't mind, just so long as you always come home to me, and sit with me,... like this."

"Beatrice, how can that be all right with you?"

She gave a shrug. "Works both ways, Joshua. How can you be all right with a wife who doesn't let you share her bed?"

"That's different,... the reasons are outside of the game."

Beatrice set down her knitting. "Did Charlotte feed you?"

"Feed me? No. But I'm all right."

She rose from her chair. "I can do you eggs and bacon,... and some chips. Is that all right?"

"Really I'm fine,.. it's rather late to be putting a meal together."

"You must eat Joshua. I know I'm not clever. Not like you,... and maybe not like cousin Charlotte, but I can do eggs and bacon, and some chips,... and be happy."

"I know,... I'm sure you can, Beatrice. It's just that you mustn't feel that you have to."

"If I can do it and you need it, then it would be cruel not to, wouldn't it? And everyone needs their food. Simple."

She seemed satisfied with this run of logic and gave a little nod as if to confirm it. I could not refute it. "I would be grateful," I said. "I'm actually starving."

So, Joshua and Beatrice were married, I thought, seeing if I could follow the threads of this version of the story: There was also a tension between them, so that they did not share a room, and there was apparently an understanding that Joshua had made a mistress of his cousin Charlotte. This seemed reprehensible to Matthew, but it seemed it was a part of the game, and he was going to have to live with it.

I ate, and drank the tea she had made for me. Then we returned to the parlour and I read a while as she sat, sometimes knitting, sometimes gazing into the coals. Was this possible? There was a deep contentment in our companionship, a softness in the energy pervading my very bones so that it felt like I had known this woman all my life. This stranger!

"I'll go up now, I think," she said.

It was a little after ten. I bade her a courteous goodnight, caught myself bowing like an old fashioned gentleman, then moved to the desk and sat 'till midnight, reading Amanda's coded journals, and writing my own. But this was not a time for any profound insight, no insightful words to be jotted down - the hour was always too late for that. There were no moments of revelation, only a slow gestation, and most of it unconscious,... a thought here, a memory there, tossed like logs onto the brazier of experience. Things changed but slowly, for me, and rarely from some conscious thought - it was more that the profound steerings came from dreams, from their morning aftermath of twisted emotion that somehow always straightened itself out into a fresh slant on life.

Nietzche said that there are those who either do not dream, or those who dream in an interesting manner. I wonder what he would have thought had he spent a few nights at Cragside, for the climb to bed was never undertaken without a certain trepidation, a certain anxiety regarding the power of the dreams that might come. I had learned not to fear the dreams themselves, for such reticence only invited the nightmares one most wished to avoid. An earlier Beatrice had been right: you needed an innocent heart if you hoped to survive the nights at Cragside. Instead I persuaded my fear to attach itself to

the cause of accurate interpretation, a fear that I would not understand the message the dreams were sending me.

That night I pondered at the desk until the embers glowed no more, and a chill seeped into the air. Then I retired and slept deeply, wearied by my walk to Greendale and by the emotional roller-coaster ride of my time with Ellen McBride, or Charlotte as she was apparently sometimes to be known.

I dreamed of her a little, the touch of her skin,... but it was of Beatrice I was most aware, not the Beatrice who slept in the room across the landing, but the Beatrice I had once loved, all those years ago. She came into my room, a figure aglow in a sphere of amber candlelight, sweeping aside the covers and laying her snug form beside me, so that I gasped with joy at her resurrection, though I was perfectly able to remind myself I was dreaming. I did not question it, but lay quiet, daring only once to lay my hand upon the warm swell of her belly.

Gently, she brushed it aside: "This is not a touching game," she said.

And in the morning, it seemed reasonable to assume when she was still there, that I had not yet woken, until the dawn matured and the light filled the room to reveal locks of soft hair fanned out upon the pillow,... I drew back then, as if waking to find I'd shared the night with a crocodile or a coiled snake. She lay there, insensible, this wielder of knives, this creature that could not remain in a room with a stranger without twisting this way and that in fear and suspicion. She lay there, beautiful and smiling in her sleep, a smile of innocent repose. Hardly daring to breathe, in case I woke her, I stole from my room to seek coffee and the sobriety of the chill air.

There is a comfort to be found in dull routine. In a modern house, heat would already have permeated the every nook and cranny of the place, or at most required only a few minutes of discomfort to be endured while the switch was thrown in order to light the fire. But with the old kitchen range, it was by no means certain a fire would greet you at all in the morning. It depended on the ash accumulated in the pan, and the strength of the wind drawing on the chimney. Then too much wood tossed in might easily put it out. Seeing to the fire then was a kind of meditation, requiring a single point of focus and a desire to achieve a Zen like condition of harmonious balance.

While I coaxed life back into the range, I was able to ignore the fact that I had probably spent the night with her. Then a dream image came to me from the embers as I watched them burn. She cradled a child, nursed it, sang to it,... a forgotten image, sparked by her knitting soft woollens last night no doubt, but the whole came together and caused a shift in my mood, filling my intuition with harbingers of irrational doom.

When she came downstairs later, I looked at her closely. She was wrapped in a dressing gown, and looked pale, I thought,... perhaps even sickly.

"Did you mean to share my bed?" I asked, thinking it best to be open about

things.

"Sometimes I sleepwalk. I'm sorry Joshua." She looked genuinely contrite.

"It's all right. It's just that we said this was not a touching game."

"But we didn't touch did we?"

"No,... but it's a dangerous thing, what we did. Won't you let me lock my door?"

She looked anxious - her eyes widening, red rimmed. "Please don't do that. Are you angry with me?"

"Not angry, Beatrice. But we must be careful. This is an imagining game. To touch might break the dream. I am just a man. Here, now, in the light of day, I can tell myself I do not want to touch you. But at night, cosy, in a warm bed,... with a warm woman beside me, even if she is a stranger, it would take a superman not to want her. And I am not a superman."

She looked lost and vulnerable then, and hauntingly beautiful,... but it was too much for her, the conflict, the irreconcilable facts that she could not sleep without my door being unlocked, yet could not guarantee her somnambulistic footsteps would not bring her to my bed again,... that the risk of our touching was real. Why were all Beatrice's sleepwalkers?

She doubled over, so that her long hair swept the floor and she leaned against the balustrade, her free arm wrapped about her gut as if she'd been stabbed, and she moaned softly. I came closer then, closer so that I could feel her heat. She smelled of the hills, wild smells, the moorland sedge and heather, and fresh cut grass and crushed fern. She sensed my proximity and drew back a fraction, but I made sure the hallway was available to her for flight, and she chose not to take it, so I ventured a couple of inches nearer.

"Beatrice? Sometimes when we see someone hurting, it can be a kindness to offer them our touch. Do you understand? It doesn't mean we want sex with them."

Her words came halting and shot through with the pain of a not too distant memory. "Men always want sex. You said it just now. You said that if I came to your bed again you might rape me."

I retreated, crestfallen. Had I said that? It sounded unlike me, and yet,.. thinking about it, that's exactly what I *had* said, that I might not be able to help myself, regardless of how she felt about the matter, regardless of her intentions in coming to me - that she would have been asking for it. "Perhaps you're right. I was wrong to say it. Of course I wouldn't try to have sex with you."

"Then it wouldn't be dangerous?"

"I didn't say that. It would still be dangerous." What did she want from me? "Perhaps it would be all right,... I don't know."

"Maybe yes. Maybe no," she said. She was calmer now and thinking more clearly. "It depends I suppose - on who's in charge: dark side, or light side. Man's dark side's in charge, he'll try to have sex pretty quick. Tie my hands and beat me with a stick. Tie me so I can't close my legs together. Push his poker in my mouth, then my pussy, then my bottom - so it tears and it's weeks before I can walk easy again, and the more I scream, more excited Mr. Darkside will get. So I don't scream,.... I don't scream Joshua."

"Beatrice,... my God,... I'm so sorry, so desperately sorry for what happened to you."

I wanted to touch her then, wanted to close her in an embrace, but I didn't dare.

She swivelled her eyes away from me. "It's all right," she went on, as if talking to herself, reassuring herself. "Joshua is not Mr. Darkside - at least not on the outside. He's Mr. Lightside. Might think it, might imagine those things in guilty flashes, but he won't do it because Mr. Lightside's in charge. Yes? Joshua would never hurt Beatrice that way." She swivelled her eyes back to me. "Would he?"

"No, no of course not. But, Beatrice,... Joshua might put his arm around you and snuggle close. He wouldn't mean anything by it. He'd just do it in a sleepy sort of way. But I think it would still make you afraid. Look at us now: we're feet apart, yet you're rigid with fear that I might come any closer. That's what I meant when I said it might be dangerous."

She sat upon the stairs and flicked back her hair, her eyes darting from side to side as she thought this through. To me it was an irreconcilable thing - that sharing a bed could be somehow less frightening for her than standing in the same room with a man. It was quite mad. "A sleepy cuddle?"

"Yes,..."

"I won't be afraid if it's just a sleepy cuddle, Joshua."

I could see the swell of her breast through the loose lacing of her night-gown, a potent nipple pressing against the cotton and I had to tear my eyes away. She read my mind and adjusted her dressing gown. "You think I'm pretty?"

"Beatrice,... it's better not to talk about such things. Forget sleepy cuddles. I'm a man. Sleepy cuddles leads to touching - and given your,... sensitivity,... it might panic you."

She ignored the warning but ploughed on with her own side of the conversation, making connections, finding her way through a fog of experience I could barely imagine. "I'm not like others, Joshua. Got bosoms like all the rest, but I'm not the same inside. Understand?"

"I know,..." And though this was not the time to ask, I put on my best face, my smiling, reassuring and tender face to hide the fact that I was quaking inside. "Beatrice, this might sound forward, but are you pregnant?"

She nodded.

"And,.. could I ask,... whose child,..."

She fixed me with an expression of false certainty. "Well, it's ours, Joshua. Baby's ours of course!"

## Chapter 29

## A stalking ego

Beatrice returned to her room in order to dress. When she reappeared, she seemed once more perfectly serene, but I understood this to be a well practised side to her and one that was not at all robust, so I smiled, a smile she returned in kind, and it was thus we agreed to pretend to one another that everything was perfectly all right.

She brought me tea: a delicate China cup and saucer, a teapot, a little silver strainer and sugar-bowl, all neatly arranged on a dainty serving tray. Then she retired, more like a housekeeper than a wife, more like an employee than a lover, and the mother of our child. I did not touch the tea, nor yet write anything down in the journal I had begun, and from which you are now reading this account: that was to come much later, when there was time to think and to write. Instead, I considered the blank page, one hand upon the Changes, desperate for their counsel, yet knowing already their answer; that it was pointless speculating upon the meaning of events, or the likely direction of their evolution while I remained in the grip of such an intense emotion.

I was thinking I had been down this road before, a long time ago, with another woman, another pregnancy, another hard pill to swallow,... one of sacrificing a good number of years to the raising of a child that was not mine, for reasons that were still unknown to me. The facts of my past now seemed to pierce my flesh. They reminded me that I had not accepted things with quite as good a grace as I had supposed back then. They reminded me that for a while, I had in fact resented Aaron's intrusion, a small screaming bag of wind, disturbing my life, my purpose, my illusion of peace with a woman who in fact could no longer bear the sight of me. It made no difference that I had already explored these things at length; I was being made to face them all over again. I had to admit the resentment, admit I had buried it, forgotten, fed it to the monster of my unacknowledged self,... the Mr Darkside of whom Beatrice had so eloquently spoken.

All right, I thought,... I admit it,... I had gritted my teeth and got on with it. But was my lack of purity in this respect the reason Aaron had later been taken? Was this another chance to prove myself? I groaned at the prospect. I had come here thinking to dally with things that did not cross the boundaries of imagination. All these things exist in the mind, I'd told Ellen McBride, they do not cross the borderland,... but of course they do; even to describe a dream is to allow it to inform the tangible world. By our words our imaginings cross the borderland and run riot. If it was my fate to raise a child with this woman, then I would do it, but to raise it in such an environment as this seemed unfair on the child, for this was a world of adult fantasy, and perhaps unspeakable folly.

I wanted to run, but instead I walked. I pulled on my boots that I noticed Beatrice had lovingly cleaned since yesterday, and I took in a long swathe of fell, from Drummaur Tarn, sweeping north upon a rising swell of hills, then east, drawing closer, hour on hour towards Greendale and my promised rendezvous with Ellen McBride, or my cousin Charlotte, depending on whom you imagine to be in charge of the narrative at this point. That was the plan anyway, but as time drew on I realised I was in fact no nearer Fernlea even by mid-afternoon, than I had been when I'd set out that morning. I had promised her I would set her feet upon the Tantric path, but I was too agitated, too shaken even to imagine her face, let alone conjure up sufficient calm for instructing such a woman in the devotional stimulation of her sex. I would have to make an excuse, put her off until another time.

It was a bright clear day, the backs of the fells like green whales basking. It might have proved refreshing except I noticed early on there was a presence, not at all benign, something stalking, a dark energy, a shadowy energy, one step, two steps behind, until I turned around, when it was always gone, fled once more to the periphery of consciousness. But I knew not to ignore this feeling and so, coming upon the ruins of the chapel I'd once visited with the first Beatrice, I took up a position in the overgrown cemetery, and awaited the resolution of things. I read the time in the slow ritualistic way afforded by a pocket watch: drawing the thing up from my waistcoat pocket, thumb sliding along the cool of the chain until the watch rises into the palm, then the thumb flicks the catch and the case pops open to reveal the time, black numerals upon an off white, ceramic dial: three thirty. Cragside time.

I would set an arbitrary limit, of six o'clock, I thought, by which time things would have to have resolved themselves, or I could not go on to Greendale, and would return instead to Cragside, a day's walk wearier, and no closer to the truth. As things turned out, I did not have to wait very long at all. And when it came to me I gazed in wonder, not for the first time, at the meaning of things.

"What? You smile, Mr. Rowan?"

It was Planer! He was dressed in a dark Victorian suit with a bowler hat and a long grey Mackintosh. "This is the game you play is it not?"

"I'm sorry, Inspector. I'd not taken you for a player, that's all."

He looked flushed and uncomfortable in his collar and his odour, as he came from downwind of me, suggested he had indeed been tracking me all day. I smelled labour and doggedness and the blackness of something burned.

"How can we help each other Inspector?"

"That's not the way it works, Mr Rowan. The way it works is you help me, and I refrain from hurting you."

"If you'll forgive my saying so, that doesn't sound like much of an arrangement."

"Maybe not, but I'm afraid it's the way of things for now."

He was playing the sinister policeman, the theatrically thuggish Inspector from the secret world of the nation's psyche, the nation's unconscious - the part we can only acknowledge exists, but otherwise have no firm knowledge of. Was this the real him, I wondered, or as with everything else was reality negotiable?

"Why don't you just get on and hurt me, instead of talking about it all the time," I said, thinking to test him.

Planer removed his bowler and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. He was no longer breathing heavily, but measuring his breaths, his body more under control now. He was a powerful man, and apparently quite fit for all of his sickly odour. He took out a flick knife, and with a click revealed a six inch stiletto blade, the mere possession of which would have been sufficient grounds for arresting anyone else. He studied it briefly, felt the edge on both sides of the blade with the ball of his thumb, and then proceeded to pick the dirt out from under his nails with the point of it.

"I never hurt anyone until I've studied them for a long time," he said. "We don't all have the same fears, do we? By getting to know a man first, you come to know also what it is that would hurt him the most, if he were to lose it. An eye? An ear? A lung? A finger or two? Some toes perhaps?"

It was the same script, I thought, but squandered pointlessly on an ordinary man like me. "What are you doing here? Why are you wasting your time with me? Why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm studying you."

"And you conclude what? That I am a threat to the security of my country? A terrorist? A subversive?"

"I've drawn no conclusions,... I merely observe. I told you I'd be watching."

"Look, you must know all about my relationship with Beatrice by now. Therefore equally, you must know what holds me to this place."

But Planer was not a man capable of listening it seemed. Mainly he just talked. He defined his view of the world through the development of his own one sided conversations and seemed not to hear the contributions of his hapless interviewees. His interrogation technique, I imagined, would consist of preconceiving what it was he wanted his victim to say, then applying all manner of unspeakable agonies until compliance was obtained.

"You have no male friends, Mr. Rowan. That is my first observation," he said.

This drew me up and made me think. It was a curious tack he had chosen but I had to admit he was right. "Very well, but I don't see what that has to do with anything. And surely, since most of the world's outrages are perpetrated by men, I should have lots of fellow male conspirators if, as you say, I am a threat to life and limb."

"I told you, I've drawn no conclusions. At present I'm merely noting the facts, and listing them in order of their curiousness."

"And that's at the top of your list?"

"Oh no, Mr. Rowan, it's some way down the list I'm afraid. There are many other facets to your nature I consider to be much stranger and far more disturbing than that."

"By what standards do you measure strangeness? That I have no police record? That my driving licence has no endorsements? That I was never a juvenile delinquent? That I have no debts? That I do not subscribe to pornographic websites? That I've always abided by society's rules? If so, then I concede I'm a strange kind of guy."

Planer nodded, smiling to himself. "You think you're so clean, don't you? Never a foot wrong. But we all have our dark little places." He produced a notebook and flicked through it slowly. "You like to surround yourself with women, don't you?"

"Women?"

"There's the current woman you're bedding with, for example - not the full shilling I note. Shame on you! Then there's a certain young lady who runs a bookshop,.. queen of the finest collection of erotica in Manchester and some of it of questionable legality - she's a little young for you, if you don't mind my saying. Then there's a certain Ghita Singh,... purveyor of New Age quackery, and mistress of all manner of exotic debauchery. And finally there's our own Ms McBride, disgraced officer, in hiding from her own disturbingly dark past,... and on borrowed time I might add - dismissal immanent. Altogether that makes a veritable harem! And all vulnerable,... which is very satisfying from my point of view for it makes them all bound to dance to a tune of my deciding, should I choose to interfere. I wonder, Mr. Rowan, I fancy myself as a bit of a psychologist you know and I'm thinking it could be that you want to be a woman yourself. Is that it? Perhaps your costume is wrong. You should be wearing a skirt. Would you like one of your harem cut off your prick so you can be like them? All girls together then, eh? Is that it, Mr. Rowan?"

There was no doubt this was a meaningful encounter, but as usual the meaning eluded me. I could see Planer presenting himself to me as my shadow, the part of me I had suppressed deep in the unconscious, the part of me I naturally piece together from all the facets of character I deny in myself. Unless we deal with the shadow, all attempts at seeking instruction from the divine feminine, from those such as Beatrice will fail. This is exactly what Planer was telling me. But I thought I had dealt with the more damaging contents of my shadow years ago. I no longer projected my unconscious shortcomings onto others. I looked at people and did not see reflected back an image of my own prejudice. I looked at Planer and did not hate him in an irrational way. I feared him certainly, because he was a dangerous man, but

looking at him I experienced no reflected emotion whatsoever. If he was a manifestation of a shadow archetype, it was of a splintered variety I had never encountered before.

"Ugly word, 'prick', don't you think, Inspector? I wonder what the etymology is? I must study it sometime. You know, the vernacular is so commonplace these days, so much of it a cliché, it has very little power to shock any more. Plain English is far more powerful I find, though I prefer the poetic metaphor myself. I call it a shaft or a sex, while the ancient practitioners of the Tantric arts might have called it lingam, the wand of light,... but 'prick',... really, that's such a dreary, adolescent sort of word. As for your theory, you may be right in part, though I suspect my goal is more to attain a state of ambiguous sexuality,... the natural state of the true psychic self, rather than vagina envy, though it's an interesting point and I'm willing to explore it. However if I'm not mistaken you're drawing conclusions here inspector and you said that was not your aim."

"Ha,... well put. Ever the academic, eh? Well remember this: You cannot get what you want from these women without my say so. They dance to my tune. I snap my fingers and they all disappear. Do you understand?"

"I must admit I'm struggling to understand the meaning of this encounter entirely, Inspector."

"Let me speak plainly then. If you please me, I'll let you play with them. Anger me and they all vanish overnight."

"Like Amanda Fleetwood did?"

"You're catching on."

"Forgive me for asking but what was my crime? How did I fail so badly that it cost her her life?"

"You failed to understand how intimately I'm entwined with the lives of every woman you look at. None of them can help you, Rowan. None of them will heal you until you've dealt properly with me. Every woman you touch, remember that I've been there before you. They carry my mark of ownership on their private parts. Everything you ask of them, they look to me first for my permission before they even speak to you. You're alone, Rowan. I'm the door you have to go through, and I'm not for opening."

"Why deny me? I've done nothing wrong!"

"You created me, didn't you? You and your kind. Without people like you there'd be no need for people like me. I'm the price you pay for the path you tread."

"What kind of outrage do you think I'm planning?"

"The subversion of society."

"You're being over-dramatic, Inspector. You're being ridiculously theatrical."

"Alchemy, Mr. Rowan. You are conducting an experiment in alchemy,..."

"Is that what you think? That I'm turning base metals into gold, making myself rich! Am I subverting the world's gold markets, perhaps?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You know well enough what kind of alchemy I'm talking about."

"And what possible interest is that to the State? Transformation of the spirit is a personal affair. It has no bearing on the tangible world, no reason for governments to fear it, any more than they need fear the Church of England. Are you seriously telling me this is the true nature of your anxiety?"

"There are many ways a state can be subverted."

"A handful of hippies, studying their dreams and chanting Om? Forgive me, Inspector, our numbers are so few,... and our aims are to take refuge from society, not turn it upside down. Nor are we organised in any way. We are each of us alone."

"You say your numbers are few, but they are growing. There are more like you and Ghita Singh than you think. And if everyone took refuge, where would society be then? It would become a meaningless shell."

"No, Inspector, society is already a meaningless shell. That's why so many are choosing to escape it."

"You reject the values of society, and yet you claim not to be subverting it?"

"Society has no values. It has no meaning. Society does not exist in the sense you would have us believe at all."

"There are rules,..."

"Your argument is weak. Rules do not provide meaning, they merely define acceptable behaviour. You know this! I have broken no rules, I am a clean skin. I abide by your rules! I merely reject the fantasy that society can provide meaning. I choose to find my own meaning, inside of myself."

This was unthinkable. I was getting by far the better of him and I had to suppress a little thrill at the measure of my own superiority.

"You're sick, Rowan. You need help."

"By locking me up you mean? Since my so called crimes all take place inside my head, I don't really see how locking me up would prevent them. To think of murder is not to commit murder any more than to dream of sex with another woman is to commit adultery. Really, I don't understand, Inspector. If you're a player, what is your role? You cannot be my shadow-self, because I don't see how I can accept your presence any more than I already have. You claim to threaten my anima-harem, like a shadow, like a dark hunter, but I don't see how I can prevent you, no matter what I do. That makes your position bogus. Could it be then that I am your shadow? Your irrational thuggishness would imply you're certainly projecting something onto me that

you've rejected in yourself."

"Do you honestly believe there's any part of you that I can admire? You disgust me, Rowan."

"But that's irrational. You don't know me."

"I have a file an inch thick on you, so don't tell me I don't know you."

"Why are you here? Why are you telling me this? I don't need to know any of it. You want to frighten me, but why? I'm not a threat to you, or anyone,... Were you watching Amanda Fleetwood? Is that it?"

"Do you believe in God, Mr. Rowan? Do you believe in a higher power?"

"At the moment I do, yes."

"Then what does your God tell you about me?"

"That you have to stop this, back away, take a deep breath. Think!"

"Your God is very articulate. I'm C. of E. myself and my God hasn't put in an appearance since the days of the Old Testament."

"Yes he has,... it's just that modern society no longer teaches us where to look for him."

It came to me then that Planer presented a very logical, rational face. Shadow was altogether darker, and no more rational than the offbeat totality I was becoming.

Then I understood.

"Forgive me, Inspector. I did not know you. Of course,... it's not every day a man comes face to face with his own ego!"

"You're a dangerous individual, Rowan. You really should be locked up."

"I've spent most of my life locked up in your prison, Inspector - a frightening place it is too; drab walls, drab reality; and everywhere the smell of fear - all of us in little cells of our own making, bound by the shackles of greed and consumerism. Ego defines normality by rules. Ego defines behaviour by arbitrary and meaningless standards.

"There was no reason for Beatrice and I to write to each other in a personal code. It was irrational. We were inspired by something other,... and that's what upset you so much. You define the world in ways that are too strict,... you cannot abide ambiguity. To you there are men and there are women, but what about the hermaphrodite? I reject your world. I embrace ambiguity. I swim in it, I revel in it. There is no true meaning in your society of rules, no future in your society of a controlling super-ego. Where is the woman in your society? You must let her go. Let her be!"

That I was talking to my own ego came as a shock, though it felt quite liberating for a while until it began to dawn on me that I did not understand

my own identity. Ego is part of us, as is Shadow, and Anima. Ego could not be rejected, it was too integral a part of us. It had to be integrated. It had to accept the validity of the inner world. And Planer would never do that. He would never leave me alone! It was terrible: I had thought I was better than this!

Planer folded the knife and put it in his pocket, then proceeded to examine his fingernails. This appeared to be more than a superficial gesture and I wondered if it were not an affectation,... strange though, that a man should be so particular about his fingernails when his body smelled so foul, like nurturing the finest orchids in a bed of weeds. Still, at least it seemed he wasn't going to stick the knife into me.

"I think we're done, Inspector."

"We'll never be done, Rowan. You'd have to kill me first."

"And clearly that's beyond both my ability, and my conscience."

"Pleased to hear it,..."

"Yet I must rid myself of you somehow. I wonder that you can afford the time in order to object so strongly to something of so little consequence. It makes me wonder if the goal is not all the more valuable for your fear of it. It makes me wonder if my own doubts as to its existence cannot be proven false by your resistance."

"You're rambling again, Rowan. Oh, how you dribble on! You isolate yourself from reality, and so begin to question its existence, but I have an idea I could convince you of it's existence in a fairly short time by merely breaking one of your fingers."

"It would convince me of nothing but the truth that the material world is defined only by the degree of its suffering. That in order to escape suffering, we must transcend this reality."

"Transcend all you like, Rowan. But I don't see you flying anywhere. To the end of your days, all you'll ever really have is me."

This was something I had feared all of my life of course, that there was nothing more to myself than what Ego told me, that indeed I was no more than what I was conscious of,... a consciousness ruled over by King Ego, a consciousness existing entirely in a reality that was questioned, probed, and measured at every turn by King Ego. And had I not experienced something other at least once in my life, I might truly have believed to this day, that indeed that's all there was.

"You must excuse me Inspector, but I am late for an appointment."

"She's not there," he replied.

"We're talking about Constable McBride?"

"I told you, you do not come to these women, except through me!"

"You're saying she won't be waiting at Fernlea?"

"I've had her sent away."

"You cannot deny access to my women,... only sow seeds of doubt."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You're an ego,... my ego,... I've had occasion to study you. I know you better than you think."

He could restrain himself no longer. He laughed.

"All right," I said, "I do not view this situation in the same way you do, and my analysis of it might seem nonsensical, even surreal and absurd, but the conclusions I shall draw from it will be far more profound than any you might draw yourself. I am going to Fearnlea now. And I know she will be there."

But Matthew Rowan's Ego had succeeded in sowing its seeds of doubt, so Matthew drew aside, and it was Joshua who rose and bid the theatrically thuggish Inspector "good day."

## Chapter 30

## Constable Ellen McBride and the Tantric Way

Clearly, these were no longer the actions of a rational man. This came home to me most forcibly as I strode out across the broad back of the fell that afternoon and began my descent from the great cairn at the dale's head into the immense depths of the verdant Greendale valley. It was a walk of some three miles, with another three awaiting me at the end of it, and all for nothing if she was not there. And in a sense she was not there. Ellen McBride did not await my coming, and her vehicle was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I entered the garden through the rickety little gate to find Charlotte wearing only a corset and drawers, watering the last of the pretty roses that grew in half-barrels by the front door.

She was pleased to see me, which confirmed the fact that this was not Constable McBride, but definitely my warmer cousin, Charlotte.

"I didn't expect you so soon!" she said.

"I'm sorry. If it's not convenient,..."

"Don't be silly. It means we'll have more time to,... well, you know,..."

"Yes,... I suppose it does."

"I,... I'm not even dressed."

"No matter - you look lovely."

"Is everything all right? You look drained. You're walking too much, too far, too soon. You must go easy on yourself, build up your fitness more gradually."

"I'm fine,... I can smell the roses."

"Yes,... aren't they exotic? I've always loved roses, Joshua. You said my natural scent was roses."

The inner world had flooded the outer with its strangeness. According to Planer, according to Ego, she ought not to have been there, yet she was, as I, Joshua, had known she would be. It was a triumph of spirit over reason. Thus secure, I regained the outer world with a smile, and Ellen McBride reappeared, an incongruous figure, dressed as I had never seen her dressed before, holding a watering can, hand painted with blue and yellow flowers. Delicate, childlike, feminine,...

"Planer said you wouldn't be here."

She winced at the mention of his name. "You've seen him?"

"He was lurking in the hills, stalking me. Peculiar, that - I thought he would

have had one of his minions do that sort of thing."

She gave a shiver and seemed to feel herself suddenly vulnerable in only a few layers of cotton. She set down the can and clutched the meagre threads about her body. "I didn't send him, Matthew, if that's what you're thinking. I haven't seen him since that time in Lamarr's office. You must believe me. He's not my lover, he's not anything to do with me."

"I know. All that stuff I said last time,... forget it. I was just surfing the fringes of my dreams. I do trust you, Ellen."

"Well if I were you I wouldn't go that far. There are some things about me I haven't told you yet, things I cannot tell, not yet - but I mean you no harm."

"You said that yesterday - that you mean me no harm."

"And it's true. But tell me: what did Planer want?"

"To remind me of my inferiority. To remind me of how ridiculous I am, playing these games. To remind me that the real world is all there is."

She thought for a moment. "We need to take precautions," she said. "We mustn't think we've seen the last of him, or his kind. We can be made to disappear."

"Can they really do that?"

"The days of PC 49 are long gone. We no longer ride bicycles, Joshua. We loiter in black vans armed with machine guns. We eavesdrop, we tag, we monitor, and sometimes we shoot the wrong people. That's the trouble with guns, I suppose."

"We've done nothing,..."

"You don't know what I've done. And you? Well, your coded letters ought to be sufficient - not to charge you, but to lock you up for a few months. You're already subversive, you see?"

"By no stretch of the imagination am I a subversive."

"Aren't you? You're secretive Joshua. You lead a secret life. You think about things and hide your thoughts from scrutiny. I bet you even keep a coded diary."

"Has society really become such an over-controlling ego as that?"

"Does society have a choice?"

"Of course it does. It has to steady its nerves and hope for the best. If we prepare for the worst we can precipitate the events we most fear."

"I don't understand that view. Oh, don't go getting high ideas: you’re not that much of a threat - just another non-affiliated subversive on the watch list. And Planer's not that important either, or he wouldn't be watching you - he's just a duty plod with ministry connections and an inflated sense of his own

importance - but he's still a dangerous man."

She looked away, as if remembering something. "They told me at the station this morning I was being reassigned. They were sending me to London. They're drafting in bodies from all over the country, like they're expecting something to happen."

"Such as what?"

"It could be Armageddon,... or it could be nothing. I know you live a quiet life mostly, but really, there *are* people - political, or ideological extremists - who wouldn't think twice about exploding a nuclear bomb in the centre of London. I was supposed to leave tonight. I was puzzled: normally they wouldn't have picked me for something like that - I'm considered too unpredictable. Was it his doing, do you think?"

"According to him it was, yes. Why didn't you go?"

"Because I was meeting you."

"Won't you get into trouble? This thing - it sounds serious!"

She gave a shrug. "I've been close to dismissal for years. If it comes, it comes. No. You and I are far more important than anything else in my life right now. Do you understand? You've not changed your mind I hope, about what you promised?"

"I'm still willing. But you must remember, this takes time, it takes practice and patience and there are no guarantees of results. Ellen, don't you,..."

"What?"

"Don't you need your job?"

"If you have a dog that keeps biting you, do you keep it?"

"I suppose not. But your salary? Your pension?"

"These are the things that chain us, make us do the things that are against our nature. But there comes a point when you realise you'd sooner starve than go on lying to yourself. Really, Joshua, as my guru, you should be telling me these things."

"I am not your guru - but I take your point."

We stood a while, both of us with out gazes lost in the surrounding fells, sweeping the skylines as if we thought we might catch a glimpse of Planer. I had thought the day soured, the moment ruined - how could we tune out something so vile as that? But the light was shifting, clouds were moving, their shadows stroking the fells, erasing the memory of what had been before: the agitated, the transient, the turbulent, with what had always been there.

"Come," she said, at last, her voice a whisper, conveying even the feel of the fells as they appeared to me, as the energy of them stirred my heart. "We mustn't waste any more time thinking about it."

She seemed hungry. "Ellen, the first lesson you must learn is that time is never of the essence."

"All right, all right. Time is never of the essence, now hurry!"

I gave a sigh: this really wasn't going to work, yet I had no visions of Ghita admonishing me. My own attitude was correct, then,... but it was hardly enough, or was it? Surely the first time with Ghita, like Ellen, I had been beside myself with excitement.

There was something brisk and business like in the way she ushered me inside, and in the way she climbed the stairs to her sanctuary, something business like even in the way she dropped her underwear on the landing before entering. I removed only my jacket and my shoes, since I was not intending to participate personally, but she confronted me, a hand on my chest, fingers widespread, barring access. "No one enters this room with their clothes on," she said. "Only naked, do you understand? Naked like children, and unashamed. These are my own rules, part of my own myth, do you understand?"

"You're changing. You are not the same as when I first met you."

"Is that good?"

"If you call falling off the edge of the world good, then I suppose it is."

"Get undressed. I've lit a fire. It should be warm and cosy by now."

She turned and entered the sanctuary, taking up her place, cross legged before the candle. Meanwhile, I disrobed, my clothing falling carelessly upon hers, my sex irksome in its alertness as was inevitable at the sight of her. I could not let her see it though, and so took a moment before I dared to sit before her.

"We do not make love, Ellen," I said, seeking to reassure her as I lit the candle. "This is not intercourse, but it requires a kind of love. It requires purity and trust beyond just sex. Do you understand?"

She shook her head, then stroked her long hair out into two handfuls that she laid down prettily over her breasts. "You'll have to teach me what it means."

"Very well. First you must begin to breathe. Relax yourself,...

"Good,… now when you're ready you may begin to stroke yourself, but gently. Do you understand? Can you do that with me watching?"

She nodded, though she was far from certain about it. Our was a generation programmed from puberty to believe such things were shameful, even damaging, and such insidious mental programming is hard to break. We might of course be most proficient in private, but it is a guilty secret, a secret we do not share for fear of the shame of admitting we enjoy the pleasure of our own selves, for fear that the person who might taunt us is somehow purer, or less shameful than we are. We can call this person our Shadow, and it is a very liberating thing, to have someone we trust bear witness to such a private thing.

It weakens our shadow, and opens up all manner of possibilities for our selves.

She straightened her back, closed her eyes and began to play her fingers upon her sex. Her movements were timid, her fingers elegantly poised like a musician's, and it required very little effort before her folds began to open. She was highly aroused already, her sex glistening and dewy.

"We must be careful or all of this will be for nothing," I said. "Do not approach your climax, but keep gently touching, and listen to my voice. We think we understand sex, but we don't. We learn sex by touching ourselves as teenagers, we understand our climax consists of two things. There are physical contractions of the muscles - in men and women it is the same - and there's also the release of something in the brain, like a shot of the most euphoria-inducing drug. These things occur close together, the contractions first, then the euphoria, so we make the assumption that the one is triggered by the other, but this is not true, do you understand?"

She nodded.

"We believe the euphoria must die as the contractions die,... and so it cannot be sustained. It dies, it lasts a few seconds and is gone, until the next time. It is the euphoria we seek, yet we are unable to sustain it, because we misunderstand the nature of it. But it can be sustained, Ellen. It can be sustained for a long time.

"Now tense your legs as you stroke yourself. Feel your breasts as they become taut, caress them, rise to your own touch. Squeeze your thighs, feel your sex rise to meet your lover. Good,... again,... but your lover is not a man, not anyone you have ever known. Your lover is an essence, a spirit of maleness that dwells within you.

"You are making love to yourself, Ellen, to the part inside of you that is male. Good,... Feel your climax begin,... now stop,.... relax,... relax your legs,... feel your body sinking into the floor. Do you feel yourself sinking, Ellen? Slowly, let your climax sink with you,... feel it sinking, moving away, almost out of reach now,... but now you must gently take its hand, draw it near and begin once more,... be gentle with yourself,... do not rush this. Be gentle Ellen,.... All right now stop. Rest."

It was inconceivable that she would reach any great heights that evening, but this was how Ghita had initiated me,.. without her touching, and none of the inner worship of all that was opposite to our own gender. Always, there had been only the sound of her voice as I had lain upon the cushions in her sanctuary. Nor had I reached any great heights myself by this method, only glimpsed something that had created the worth of her own hands upon me in the weeks and the months that followed, and finally her body.

"All right, let's try again. Gently now,... I know you want to come but that would end it all. Instead, you must draw the feeling up,... pull it up, squeeze

your sex, squeeze it out and up. You spine is like a straw and you are sucking the sexual energy, the heat, up your spine into your brain"

Smut! Guilt! The laughter of adolescence at any mention of intimate relations between a man and a woman! How can it be that our once profound understanding of Eros could be reduced to a fat cherub with a bow and arrow, and a locked bottom drawer full of pornographic magazines, or an Internet teeming with salacious images? Such is the nature of our sexual maturity, and in spite of the labours of many a more enlightened therapist in recent decades, it is at this puerile level we still relate to the erotic, reducing it to a mere contract between people, a form of conquest, an expression of power,... a triumph of Yang over Yin, instead of an expression of the eternal dance of creation. How can we misunderstand it so completely?

The bud of her sex began to swell. "Gently, now, or this will soon be over."

Orgasm begins in the face, and thus I was able to guess at its approach. She approached hers like one stepping out of a noisy, bothersome place and into a peaceful hush. Her features grew less taut, more dreamy, one side of her mouth rising slightly more than the other. Also, as she climbed the stairs of her climax, her body became more angular in appearance, the muscles of her arms and legs and her abdomen becoming more rigidly defined, but each time something would hover over her, and she could be coaxed back down into feminine softness. She was feeding off the energy,...

"Touch me! " she breathed. "I want it. Touch me. Make me do it, make me do it!"

"Relax, Ellen. Do not tense yourself. We are just beginning."

I knelt closer and stroked the insides of her thighs with the backs of my hands. The feeling was exquisite, and caused me to lower my head a little so that her natural bouquet seemed almost overpowering. The room was thick with it, thick with the scent of sex, the atmosphere stretched tight.

Gently, I began to circle my hands in the soft pools of her thighs - long figures of eight, up and down, so that she fell in with the rhythm and my hands gave her something to react against.

"Imagine your lover inside of you. You are in control of him. You take only so much as you need to reach almost to the crest of your climax. Then relax. Draw it up. Do not give in to the contractions, do not let them overcome you. You are in control."

It was apparent that something unusual had begun to happen when her eyes, which had been shut tightly throughout, began slowly to open. It was written there,... a bewildered delight.

"Remember, the euphoria can be sustained. You have begun to ride it like a wave. When you feel the wave falling, you can raise it again,... Now, once more,.... ever so gently. You are so aroused now, it needs only the lightest touch, and see how the wave rises. There,... you feel it? Now ride it,... relax."

Her eyes were open wide now. They filled slowly with tears which trickled out sideways and her mouth began to form an expression of permanent awe. Strange, I thought, that when I had first seen that mouth I had fancied it to be capable only of scolding. She continued to caress herself, but gently now, like one who had succeed by great effort in setting a giant wheel into motion, and now could keep it going by only the lightest of occasional touches.

I had not expected her to progress this far. Usually, in the beginning, things could be sustained for only a matter of moments before the urge to climax became too strong, too tempting,... Gently then I pressed my palm against her fingers. Pressed them into the moistness of her folds, broke the rhythm and then observed the wheel running down in her eyes. She was stunned,... stoned,... looking occasionally at me as if to speak but unable to form the words. Her body began to glisten with moisture,... her forehead, her neck, her breasts,.. like one recovering from a faint, so I slipped from the room quietly and returned with a blanket to cover her.

"Now remember," I said. "You must circulate the energy back. Do not leave it in your head. Bring it back down,... do it now. Let me feel you doing it!"

It was an hour before she spoke. I sat with her, my arm around her and was eventually moved to brush the matted hair from her eyes, otherwise we remained quite still. I had thought she was in a daze, but she caught my hand and clamped it to the cool of her breast. Then she whispered something through dry lips, so that I had to lower my ear in order to catch it.

"What was that? Was it real?" she asked.

"Only you can judge. And all of this might only raise more questions than answers for you. But touching that place inside will alter something. It will make you ask questions of reality that you never thought to ask before."

She nodded.

"Can you describe what you saw, what you felt?"

"Light,... joy,... no words, nothing,... I would never have thought it possible to feel such a thing."

"With practice, we can sustain this for much longer, but the energy becomes more dangerous. If we are not careful, the darker things inside of us can feed upon it. I suggest we leave it for a while, for a few weeks perhaps. You need time to reflect on this - to practice a little, perhaps."

"Yes,... I can see that's sensible. Thank you,... thank you for showing me this."

"No. It was you,... you who opened the gateway, you who found the skill to walk this path into yourself, Ellen. Remember that."

"And do you love me, Matthew?"

"Yes."

"Like you love everyone? Even though you don't know them and will never

meet them? Like you love even your worst enemy?"

She was in a euphoric state,… ego flown, persona mislaid for a while,… and for a while entirely connected to everything there is, hardwired into the energy of the universe, the energy of this place. I liked this side of her more. "We should try to love everyone, yes,... with the innocence of children, untarnished by contact with the world. To hate only weakens us."

She smiled. "You have such a delicate nature, Matthew Rowan. It was your feminine, your Beatrice who talked me into this state of mind. You have been a woman for me."

"That's one way of looking at it I suppose."

By degrees she came back more o herself and finally stirred. "I would like to be Charlotte for a while, I think." With an effort, she cast aside the blanket and ran my hand down her belly. "And you Joshua,... I want you to prove to your that you can also be a man."

## Chapter 31

## Charlotte makes a man of Joshua

Charlotte's room had the scent of roses, and Joshua understood perfectly well that this was Charlotte now who lay beneath him with all the gentle passivity of a woman, accepting his sex and receiving it inside her own. Ellen McBride would have ridden him, he thought. He would have lain submissively beneath her while she thrust against him with all the coiled energy of a man. But Charlotte took him in and received his seed most tenderly. Her only demand was when, afterwards, breathless and dizzy, he made to withdraw, he felt the daggers of Ellen McBride's nails pricking his rump, holding him captive for a while longer.

"Not yet," she said. "Let me feel that maleness swelling me up. Let me feel it, Joshua! None of Matthew's Tantric tricks now!"

And so they lay together, sweating and sleepy. But in truth it was Matthew who had taken her, Joshua remaining somewhere in the background of it all, observing quietly the milk white skin and the pointed breasts of his mistress, while she lay in the embrace of another man. Eventually though he crept inside and savoured the feel of his sex in the hot, wet trap of her body, and he was reminded of his wife, reminded of the fact that she carried his child, and he hated himself.

It fell to Matthew to rescue him from his dilemma, by stroking Charlotte's sleepy face. "Now I must go," he said.

She stretched luxuriously, reluctant to release him. "All right, but you must bathe first, Joshua. It would not do for Beatrice to smell my roses in place of her lavender. Go and bathe, then I'll walk with you up to the cairn. But lie with me for another five minutes,.. please."

"This feels so delicious to me, Charlotte, I could stay for ever, but I'm not sure it's proper."

"Does it not feel good to thrust against a woman?"

Yes, it felt good. It felt stupidly good, and it had been so long, so long with anyone in such a straightforward way. "It seems you have made a man out of me, Charlotte."

She ran her fingers over my lips. "When seeking the side of ourselves that's eternal," she said, "we should be careful not to forget the side of us that is human. There is no harm in it, surely?"

"Of course, you're right," I said. "But would we really know the genuine human side of us? The side that is not Charlotte or Ellen,.."

"Or Joshua or Matthew?"

"Or any of those other faces we put on. For a man to know his maleness,..."

"And a woman her femaleness,..."

"And to come together without agenda or artifice,..."

"Speaking of which, if I thought of you doing this with another woman, I'd kill you."

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Except Beatrice. You can be this way with Beatrice,... does that sound strange?"

"Yes,... "

"Don't worry,.. I can handle this. It was me who drew you here. It's just that it's all well and good talking ourselves sweetly and philosophically into bed,... but how do you handle the green eyed god, afterwards?"

"By accepting we are not in control of our lives, and that we cannot control the lives of others."

"But what if I want you to control my life?"

"It would be wrong, Charlotte. It would grant me a power over you that would destroy us both."

"It's just that I'm afraid to be alone."

"It takes courage to be alone and only those who have learned to be comfortable with themselves are successful at it, just as they are the only ones who can be trusted not to steal from others."

"Steal?"

"When we feel we need others, we do not really need them. What we need is to fill a gap in ourselves."

"Does Joshua need no one then?"

"Joshua has Beatrice,.. and Charlotte."

"And Matthew?"

"Matthew it seems has a harem of women, all of them guiding his fate."

"I think Ellen would very much like to discover the art of being alone,... if it meant that Matthew could one day be comfortable at times when they were alone, together."

Matthew did not think it wise to address this point directly. "Speaking of Ellen Mc Bride," said Joshua, "Would you mind if it was she who accompanied me back up the fell?"

Charlotte feigned displeasure: "Does Joshua prefer Ellen to Charlotte, now?"

"No. It's Matthew who needs to ask her something."

"How can this be? Matthew is the teacher. What could he possibly learn from a sour old trout like Ellen McBride?"

"Ellen is the most rational of the four of us."

"It sounds hopeless - if you must resort to rationality."

"Perhaps. Could Charlotte come too? We might have need of her intuition."

"Yes,... yes. I have a new outfit - blue velvet - a lovely skirt and jacket. It needs an airing. I'm sure Charlotte will never be far away when I'm wearing it. The path up to the dale head isn't too bad - no danger of it being ruined in the mud. And I have a cape I can bring in case of rain."

So it was that evening in late Summer, as the sun melted the butter coloured light all over the lush green of the land, a grey tweed Englishman climbed to the valley's head accompanied by a colourful beauty, a splash of cobalt and lace, a dainty bonnet and an ivory silk blouse. The corset held her upright, gave her a trim and prim demeanour, but it was a demeanour that also banished the wilderness, tamed it, made it preen itself like a cat tickled under its chin.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Rowan," she said. "I mean for what you did this evening. For what you made me,... feel."

"Remember - it was you."

"Do you believe it was right? I mean to go so far?"

"You are very sensitive,... you seem ready, and more accepting than I ever was. I struggled against it,... still do. But I have a feeling you will progress quickly. You will go far beyond anything I have ever experienced."

"You will continue to teach me?"

"I'll guide you as much as I can,... for as long as you want,... but you must be careful not to attach yourself to me, Ms McBride. What you felt this evening came from inside of you. Do not project it onto me. It does not come from me. I can only show you things as I've been shown them myself. I am just an ordinary man,... a grey tweed Englishman, a ghost, slipping through his life unseen."

"Aye,.. well, that's for sure. All right, I promise I won't attach myself . You know, coming from any other man that would have sounded so egotistical!... except I'm aware your ego's detached itself and is wandering the fells like a bogeyman right now,... so I'll forgive you. Out with it then,... what is it that Matthew Rowan wants with me?"

"It seems Beatrice is pregnant."

"Ah,..." The news caused her to pause in her steps, which Matthew took as a rare indication of shock, but when he looked at her, her expression was more one of a mystery solved, more of an Aha! than an Ah!. "And the father?"

"I am the father, or rather Joshua is. That's the way Beatrice sees it, anyway."

"Much to Matthew's surprise and mystification, no doubt?"

"Yes."

She sighed, her eyes full of a peculiar knowing. "Get out of here, Matthew! Go back to your bookshop, now, this minute. You don't belong in this crazy dream!"

"The dream is mine. And unfortunately, all the elements in it are my own responsibility."

"I was afraid you were going to say something like that."

"Dreams aside, you said there was an assault, a serious assault. Beatrice told me something about it last night: a terrible rape. I wondered: can you tell me when this happened?"

"It was three years ago. You were thinking,... what? How far is she?"

"It can't be long,... six weeks maybe,... eight at the very most! I still don't want to know anything about her. But could you tell me if there's been anyone since, who might have,... you know?"

"Are you serious? I can't imagine any man being allowed within a hundred miles of her after what happened. Can you?"

"It doesn't sound likely,... so she's not really pregnant then. It could just be an imaginary thing?"

"It's possible."

"But why would a woman do such a thing?"

"How would I know?"

"You're a woman."

She gave a sigh. "I told you, she's dangerous and complicated. Who knows what's going through her mind? But perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the alternative - that she might actually be pregnant by someone else. Are you sure it's not yours, really?"

"What? No. That's impossible."

"And you're not disappointed - I mean that it's not really yours? Only I detect an odd tone in your voice."

You might think it a ridiculous suggestion, but Charlotte had hit upon something. It rang hollow, like an old disappointment come back to haunt me, and for sure it made me think. "In truth, I don't know what to say. She seems to believe herself pregnant. I just need to know what parameters we're dealing with here."

"Well now you know."

"I'm grateful for your honesty. I know you have a duty of trust,... I mean professionally, concerning what happened."

She laughed. "Trust?"

"As a police officer,...."

She looked as if she could have spat which did not sit at all well with her queenly demeanour as Charlotte. "Aye,... to protect and serve."

"Why have you not quit the force, if it causes you so much pain?"

"They'll get rid of me soon enough, but I'm not going to make it easy for them."

"What will you do afterwards?"

"I don't know. I don't care. Live at Fearnlea? become Charlotte full time. I'm beginning to like her. Does that worry you?"

"The prospect does not alarm me at all. But in the mean time - in the time that remains to you as Ellen McBride - promise me you'll be careful. You were right earlier: the State is becoming something of a blunt instrument. Egos are detaching themselves all over the place and running wild, becoming crazed projections of the things they most fear."

"I do take your meaning. And I will be careful."

As we approached the cairn at the dale's head, it became apparent that we were watched by a figure reclining among the rough pyramid of stones. It was Beatrice. Charlotte and I did not break our stride, but kept from each other a chaste distance. This was unconsciously done, and very strange because if anything Charlotte or Ellen was the woman I was closest to, both emotionally and physically. Beatrice was nothing - to either of us.

"Perhaps you should go back, now," I said.

"No. She's seen me now. It's better we meet. We'll take our leave at the cairn, like we planned. And anyway, I should like to see her again, up close - see the change in her."

"All right. Remember: think on what has passed between us. I'll leave it to you to send word when you next want us to meet. And I will come. I promise faithfully."

"I shall come to you, as Charlotte, in ten days. I shall come for lunch. Do you think Beatrice will mind?"

"If it's a problem I'll get word. Otherwise I'll see you in ten days."

As we came up to the cairn, Beatrice advanced upon us slowly. She met Ellen's eye with a steady gaze. For such a timid and fragile creature, she could at times appear most heroic. "I was worried about you Joshua," she said. "But I see you are safe."

"Yes,... I'm quite well. This is my cousin, Charlotte."

Beatrice seemed to take this fiction in her stride. "Charlotte, yes. Joshua has spoken about you." She nodded then as if remembering an old acquaintance. "I seem to remember you were someone else,... before,..."

"I'm Charlotte now," said Charlotte, her tone emphatically erasing all reference to the past. "You can forget who I might have been once. I'm pleased to know you."

"You are?"

"Of course. You are my cousin's wife. We are family, Beatrice."

Again Beatrice nodded as if retrieving something crucial through a fog of amnesia, picking her way through the connections, choosing her direction by how safe it felt. "Family. Yes. Why not? Oh,... that's such a pretty outfit, Charlotte." She leaned close and took hold of the lapel of Charlotte's jacket, then savoured the texture of the cloth between her fingers. Charlotte did not flinch but looked closely at Beatrice, as if she too were remembering something crucial from a past that had never been.

"We'll meet again, I hope?" said Charlotte.

Beatrice nodded. "Yes. Soon. Goodbye Charlotte."

So there took place a kind of exchange at the cairn. Ellen McBride handed Joshua back into the care of Beatrice and then turned to make her dainty way back to Fearnlea. Joshua and Beatrice stood and watched her quietly for a while, before beginning their own decent, back into Drummaurdale, to the vale of dreams and to Cragside.

To Matthew, who looked on from the impartial perspective of a great height, there was suddenly little difference between Charlotte and Ellen, and Beatrice. They had become different faces of the same underlying mind. It was Matthew who said to her, in what could only have been a disembodied voice: "Who are you?"

"I am Beatrice," she replied.

"And what do you want from me, Beatrice?"

They paused in their descent and Beatrice unconsciously took Matthew's hand as she eased herself over a rocky step in their path. Then she paused for a significant moment, a moment in which the rules of the game were reassessed, where the distant reality of things was acknowledged before being once more dismissed as irrelevant. "I want you to be Joshua for me," she said.

Cragside was aflame as we came down to it, a low sun grazing the fell and making the slate crackle. It was a reminder of the coming winter, the sun slipping lower with each passing day until I guessed the house would be submerged in the deepest gloom.

There are many valleys in the district that see no sun at all in the winter

months and I guessed Drummaurdale, would be one of them. Then the kitchen range would be the only source of warmth, the oil of the lamps our only light in the long evenings to come. And I was to share the shelter of it with this strange creature, who may have been a simple farm girl dealt a poor hand by fate, or another type of creature altogether, one possessed of a spirit that was not entirely human, or one that was more human than anything ever to walk upon the earth before.

That evening, when she had gone up, I sat at the desk and asked The Changes about her. I was on the brink of a new phase in my journey it said, but that I should not be deciding what direction it would take, for I did not yet have a full view of the situation. It was a blunt reading - none of the added complexity of changing lines from which might be gleaned some sense of a bigger picture, and therefore some comfort - for we can hide ourselves in complexity. No, the situation was simple with respect to Beatrice. What I needed to know would only be revealed when I needed to know it. I had forgotten how infuriating the Changes could be, but also how clear sighted.

The blue bedroom awaited, and I retired to it gratefully - grateful for its calm, grateful also for the comfort of its old books which put me in mind of O'Doires bookshop and one of the happier periods of my life, after the break-up with Emily, and the ending of my career as a programmer. Did I wish I could be spending the night with Ellen? The thought had crossed my mind, but I felt not. I had a passed a good deal of my adult life sharing a bed with a woman, and I am old enough now to accept that the company is not always welcome. That night, I wanted only my repose and the twilight world of dreams, for there was much to be digested that only the abstract forms of dreams could adequately absorb and express.

But dreams cannot be forced, only invited, and then of course it is never clear what form our dreams will take. I lay awake in the blackness, waiting, but sleep was reluctant to approach, though I was wearied by twenty miles of fell. And Beatrice came again in the small hours, as I had half expected. She slid in silently, not sleepwalking of course, but quite conscious, and she curled beside me, the round of her bottom lightly touching my leg.

She said nothing and I accepted her presence as part of the game. She was warm, and her coming brought with it a fragrant air,... the scent of Beatrice. And with her coming, I sensed a strange completeness to things, as if this was the one thing I had been waiting for. Like a man drugged I felt the consciousness drain from me, and a rare dreamscape opened up. It was so vivid it might have shocked me back into wakefulness, had I not already been so soundly asleep.

* * * * *

# Book 5

## The Book of Visions

***What if you slept? And what if, in your sleep, you dreamed? And what if, in your dream you went to heaven and there plucked a strange and beautiful flower? And what if, when you awoke, you had the flower there in your hand? Ah, what then?***

***Samuel Taylor Coleridge***

***English Poet and Philosopher***

***1772-1834***

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## Chapter 32

## The first dream

While I slept, I also moved across a moonlit landscape, a broad ridge of hummocky, emerald hills. The accuracy of the land and the physical sense of it were most striking. I could feel the texture of the grass under my feet. It had a soft velvety touch, but I could also feel the texture of the distant hills by merely running my eyes over them. These were hard and scratchy where my eyes combed the shattered crags, warm and voluptuous where the crags fell away to the rounded green and beige fell-side. I reached out with one hand and used it to stroke the outline of a hill. It felt warm and soft, dipping down like the curve of a woman's waist.

It was then I became aware of my sleeping self, afraid my sleeping hand might be touching the curves of the Beatrice, whom I supposed by now slept beside me. I did not know this to be the case for sure, but dreams have a way of convincing us of their authenticity, no matter how bizarre the imagery. Gently then I withdrew my hand from the hillscape for fear of panicking her, and instead began to get my bearings, because I knew this was a real place.

I was on Drummaur Fell, a corner of Westmoreland I knew better than any other. The dream reminded me of the old Norse derivation of Draummaur, from Draumr, meaning a dream: The hill of dreams. Indeed I was most intimate with it, as one is intimate with the woods and meadows of one's childhood. In my dream, as in reality, I was compelled to trace the smudgeling paths to the shore of Drummaur tarn, the tarn of dreams. The night was suddenly warm, the waves of the tarn thick and lapping sluggishly, like oil, and in their midst there was a woman treading water, a ghostly white form, half spirit, half real. She had her back to me, so I could not see her face, and as I moved around the tarn in order to identify her, she moved also, keeping her back firmly turned.

The dream was not technically lucid, for in a lucid dream one is aware of dreaming and also one possesses complete autonomy to move and act within the dream at will. But the dream *was* vivid, the imagery so startling and clear I am unable to forget it even now, years later.

"Please," I said. "I want to help you. Tell me how. I don't know how."

"Stop thinking," she said. Her voice was soft, and deep, and warm. "All will be well if you will only stop thinking, Matthew."

How many times had The Changes told me this?

"Tell me who you are!"

"You know me," she said. "You have always known me."

"Then let me see your face."

She turned and swam towards me, but I drew back, horrified : It was Beatrice: the Beatrice I had loved, and the woman known to the manifest world as Amanda Fleetwood.

"No, this is too much. You could have chosen any face and I would have known you. Why her? You know my heart. You know how much this hurts me!"

She rose from the water, dripping, ivory skin in the moonlight, a dragon motif curling around her breast. "The woman you knew has moved on. Sometimes flesh can fail. These things cannot be helped. She discovered much in her short time and is the better for it now. You understand these things, so there is no need for you to be sad. And it was me you loved, not her. Me you have felt issuing from this land all your life. Me who haunts you."

"Are you a memory then? Are you the thoughts of things undone, words left unsaid? Is that what you are? Are you wanting a connection in the physical world? Are you wanting me to make a connection for you that you cannot make yourself?"

"I am not a restless spirit," she said. "I am not a hungry ghost. I seek no return to the denser realities you inhabit."

"That's not what I meant."

"You know me. You know what I am."

She returned to the water and I was sure the dream was set to fade, but she waded out only a little way, then turned with arms outstretched. "Come, swim with me," she said.

"Will it not be cold?"

She coaxed me softly with her eyes. "Trust in me, Matthew."

"Matthew? Am I not Joshua?"

"Who is Joshua? Who is Matthew? Who am I? Am I Amanda, or Beatrice? Or am I the dragon's breath, the fate for whom you act as instrument? Or are we different sides of the same coin? When you look at me, is it not your own reflection that you see? This shape, this form - was it not once your own? Might it not be so again? Is that what you crave? Is that why you desire me so? Step into the water, and I'll let you wear my skin for a while."

Not really understanding her meaning, I piled my clothes by the sentinel stone and waded gingerly out. The water had a curious quality - not unpleasantly cold - more like the kiss of cool marble on a hot day. Such was the glorious feel of its touch I waded deeper, suddenly greedy to have the delicious sensation envelop every inch of my skin. And there it was, in the centre of the Tarn of Dreams, I swam into her embrace. She wrapped herself around me, coiling like a snake and pulling me down, pulling me under, a siren luring me to my doom, my unconscious swallowing my feeble awareness, a dizzying inundation of utter madness.

I would have swapped my life gladly then for an eternity of her touch, but a part of me objected, the sentinel of my sanity standing guard, like the stone reflected in the moonlit ripples of the tarn and I broke the surface, knowing she was gone. I swam alone for a while, searching for her, but it was in vain and I dragged myself onto a shelf of rock to sit in a skin that was suddenly softer than I recalled. Water ran down my back from a thick mane of long hair, and my chest moved strangely from the weight of breasts, and dipping my hand between my legs, I felt only a moist cleft where once had been the familiar knot of my sex.

I stood upon the rock then, looking down at my reflection, knowing it was me, feeling in my bones that it was me. Yet how could it? I listened between my ears for the sound of her thoughts, but they were my thoughts, yet not my thoughts, for there was no confusion - just a passive silence and the whisper of the void. I moved my arms, my legs, and felt myself possessed of great power. I felt the landscape moving, rippling to accommodate my presence. I ran my hands over soft breasts, round thighs. All was cushioned, and curvaceous and lovely,...

The shock of this was too much.

I jerked awake to the darkness of the blue-room at Cragside. But I could still feel myself as her, the shape, the sense of her, and the silence of that mind. Overwhelmed and gasping for breath, I sprang from bed and struck a match, to see Beatrice turn sleepily and open her eyes.

"Joshua, are you unwell?"

Had she come again? Who was she? Who was this strange creature and what did she mean by this? I could perhaps have dealt with one or other of these things but not both at the same time, so I ran - or at least half ran, half stumbled down the stairs before tearing out into the night, screaming a half strangled scream.

The feel of that body, that femininity haunted me, terrified me. And to my horror it was not a rejection of the thought that I had become her, become, as Planer had seemed to predict earlier that day, a woman, but that I had actually enjoyed the feel of it so much. Was that it? Had it merely been Planer's taunts that had triggered the dream?

For the moment I did not think about any of this. I simply ran out into the night to be met, not with the dreamy moonlight but the blackness of low, scummy clouds and an all too familiar drizzle that drifts like smoke about the fells. Its coldness sobered me and I lifted my night-shirt clean over my head, throwing it down upon the grass in order to reveal the middle aged bagginess of a male torso, reassuringly bosomless, and the cold-shriveled sex, which I now clasped with both hands in a mixture of relief and disgust, for all I felt now was weak and foolish and ugly, while a moment ago, in the dream, I had felt so powerful,... and wise, and so very, very beautiful.

I was standing like that when Beatrice came out with a storm-lamp, squinting through the bad weather. She was apparently not embarrassed by my immodesty.

"Joshua! What's the matter. Come inside where it's warm."

She stepped up to me then, to Joshua rather, while Matthew, somehow displaced and hovering nearby, thought he felt the cotton of her night-clothes against him as this strange, haunted creature put her arm around the semi-crazed man he had apparently become, and guided him back to the house.

"This always was a bad house for dreams, Joshua," she said.

Then it was three in the morning and I was sitting in the kitchen, covered by a blanket while Beatrice stirred the slumbering coals into life and brewed tea. I was coming round slowly, moved by her gentleness and her concern for me - even if it wasn't really me, but the man she wanted to imagine was her husband - this Joshua. Or was there more to it than that? Could the woman she really was not be becoming genuinely fond of me, in a jumpy, nervy sort of way?

"You're a strange woman, Beatrice."

"You're one to talk, Joshua. I don't think I've ever known a man quite so strange as you."

"I dare say that's likely. We're two of a kind then."

"Not really,... but I meant my words kindly."

"I know, so did I,... and thank you."

"You're welcome, Joshua."

The problem with dreams, especially dreams of a sexual nature, is that we are often tempted to interpret them literally. Thus the more prurient among you might suppose from my somewhat open and unguarded narrative that I did indeed harbour secret desires of, shall we say, a transsexual nature? For a while I wondered if this might not truly be the case, for I would have given anything to possess that body once more, to feel the power radiating from it, to feel the softness and to luxuriate in the knowledge of its beauty, my beauty, my perfection. I might have laboured long under this misapprehension but I also began to think of Min, which might seem to you a curious association until I remind you that she alone in my experience was the one person sufficiently qualified to enlighten me on matters of human sexuality, and so guide me towards the meaning of my dream.

A perversion, she once told me, might be narrowly defined as a practice that resulted in the permanent physical or psychological harming of oneself, or others as the direct result of a sexual practice. It was, she said, an obsessive and compulsive phenomenon, and therefore not in the strictest definition of things, a sexual matter at all. I would find no manuals on sexual perversion, she assured me, in the O'Doire collection of erotica.

She would only concede that the term "pervert" was more often used by the uninformed, and the sexually immature, to describe a person who appeared to be enjoying sex more than they were by all manner of imaginative techniques.

On the subject of male trans-sexualism, she had once cheekily, and provocatively shown me some nude photographs of what I had taken to be beautiful and voluptuous women, resplendent with their perfectly formed breasts and their feminine curves. However, I was confused and not a little surprised to discover these exotic creatures also possessed a male sex. At first I had refused to believe such pictures were real - I mean you can do anything with a computer and a digital photograph these days - but gradually I came to accept that here there was an area of human experience I was completely ignorant of.

Had I found the images repulsive or arousing, she'd enquired? I remember answering honestly that I had found the images confusing. Certainly I had found the femininity of such a strikingly beautiful woman-like transsexual arousing, even when I was fully appraised of the rather dubious nature of their physical sexuality, but I would not have wanted to make love to such a person, if indeed such a thing could have been physically possible - which indeed it wasn't. To have made love to a person with a penis would have been a homosexual act, I reasoned, and to the best of my knowledge, I was not that way inclined.

"But you were aroused," said Min. "You found these people to be quite beautiful, you said."

"Yes,... then I suppose there is a kind of femininity that must transcend the merely sexual?"

"Ah,... now we seem to be getting somewhere, Matthew."

"But tell me, Min. Do transsexuals prefer men, or women?"

"Most I know prefer men," replied Min.

"Then transsexuals might be classified as very effeminate homosexual men?"

"No, Matthew. Human sexuality is a very grey area. I'd hesitate to classify it at all."

"But you, as a woman, could you ever imagine consenting to sex with such a person? A feminine man, with breasts and curves, and such softness, but also an urgently expectant penis like that one?"

"Oh yes," she said,.. as if she hadn't needed to think about it very much. "I'd be more than happy to. It would all depend on the individual."

I had smiled, and nodded sagely - a middle aged man trying to appear as sexually mature as a girl half his age, and struggling, but it had unsettled me. These men had feminised themselves, she explained, by the use of hormones - a chemistry that induced the breasts and the curves of womanhood, but they had held on to their male sexes and by doing so had become a breed apart, not

an hermaphrodite, for they did not possess vaginas, as the truly rare hermaphrodites do.

I hung on to the word hermaphrodite, coming back to me as it did so suddenly. It is said that in the latter stages of one's inner, spiritual journey, the hermaphrodite will appear in dreams and fantasies, and I was tempted some way down the path of considering this to be a sign of my own advanced awareness, a sign of a profound leap in my inner transformation, except I was reminded again that the men in Min's photographs had not been hermaphrodites. Nor had I been an hermaphrodite in the dream.

I had been a woman.

Slowly, my mind began to clear as I sipped the tea that Beatrice now laid before me. This was not about my own sexuality at all: I had indeed been touched by a powerful archetype, but not the hermaphrodite, whose power disturbed me. Rather it was the part of me I might have been, I thought, had I not been born a man. It was the part of me I would have become had I been born a woman, and when such a creature begins to move in one's psyche in so astounding and symbolic a manner, it means that something important is about to happen, and you'd better listen to what she's telling you.

It was true, I had always known this woman, since my earliest adulthood. She and I were the same. She was Anima, and we had met before but never in so vivid a manner as that.

"Better now, Joshua?"

I glanced across at her, my eye drawn to the open neck of her night-gown and therein the plunge of a soft and delicate breast. There was no doubt regarding my orientation, I thought, for at a superficial level it would always be the female form that drew me.

"It was a bit of a shock," I said. "I hope I didn't frighten you."

"What was your dream about, that it frightened you so much?"

I told her, hoping perhaps in some way her innocence might yield an answer I was too sophisticated to glean for myself. "I dreamed I was a woman," I said.

She regarded me gravely. "What's so scary about that?"

"It wasn't scary at the time. In fact it felt wonderful. I felt powerful and calm,... it was when I came round a bit I realised I was afraid of losing myself as a man. That's what scared me."

"I guess you wanted to stay a man very bad, Joshua, from the way you reacted."

"Yes,... yes I did didn't I?"

"Were you relieved then,... finding all your,... bits and pieces still there?"

I blushed. "I'm sorry for making such a scene. I regret panicking now. I feel

I've wasted an opportunity,.. like the dream was teaching me something, and I couldn't handle it."

"I'm sure its not that different, you know, if you're a man or a woman,.. 'cept men don't bleed every month of course, which is a nuisance. But being a woman doesn't make me feel calm or powerful, like you described - the opposite maybe. It's men who have the power. You never hear of a woman raping a man, do you? Other way round usually,... happens all the time."

She seemed to be on the brink of sharing a confidence. I saw her eyes dart to one side, as if checking for permission from someone unseen.

"I've been wondering about that, Beatrice," I ventured gently. "You didn't press charges. The man who did that,..."

But anticipating her was a mistake and she closed herself up immediately. "That's outside of the game, Joshua," she reminded me.

"Of course,.... I'm sorry."

"Anyway,... it wasn't Beatrice it happened to. It was someone else. Someone who doesn't exist now. Someone who died, Joshua. Someone who died that day, like she'd been murdered."

I reached out without thinking and placed my hand on top of hers, but I woke up at the touch of her skin and expected her to withdraw from contact with my stinking maleness, but she didn't flinch, so I held it there, my fingers on top of her fingers.

"This is a dangerous game we are playing, Beatrice," I reminded her.

Still she kept her fingers beneath mine, though my touch was so light she might have removed them at any time. "You don't mind, then? I mean me being Beatrice?"

"We cannot always choose who we are. Sometimes circumstances force us into playing the roles we do. I don't know who you began your life as, but I understand perfectly that you are Beatrice now."

"But am I real to you, Joshua?"

"Real? Can I not feel the heat of your hand? Can I not smell the lavender of your hair, your body? I can't pretend to understand anything of what's going. It's like sharing a dream with someone,... and in that dream you are Beatrice, and you are real."

"Then it does not confuse you if I call you, my love?"

"I understand, but do you mean it? Are you really in love with Joshua?"

"Yes. Yes I am. I know this is a game, like a dream as you said, and that when we're awake you are someone else, but I've been asleep such a long time Joshua, and I do love you."

"How can that be? I mean, without also wanting to touch him? Why must

Joshua be your husband? Why can he not be your brother?"

"That's easy! If you were my brother, Joshua, you could not be the father of my child."

"Ah! I was forgetting that." Her logic was simple and disarming.

"Really, you think too deep about things, you do!"

"Too deep? Yes, my dream told me to stop thinking, then everything would become clearer."

"There you are then!"

"It's just that I thought I already had. I mean if I was thinking, I wouldn't be here at all, would I? We are both caught, Beatrice, held here in some sort of knot or ruck in the fabric of the physical world, and something with a long memory keeps repeating itself with a view to completion. We're a part of that somehow, as players or witnesses, I don't know which. But if I thought I had any choice in the matter, I would never have come back to this place, this house."

I'm not sure how much of this went in, how much she listened, nor how much she understood, but when I had finished she looked aside and withdrew her hand from under mine, then placed it upon her stomach. There she ran it lightly in circles, as if to soothe the unborn child that I knew she could not be carrying, and I wondered what sort of fool I was to expose one so fragile to my own insane view of things.

"We can't either of us escape it then, Joshua?" she asked and I was astonished for it seemed she had understood me very well.

"On the contrary - we can leave here right now," I replied "We could both dress ourselves like ordinary people. I still have a house in Manchester. We could go there, live there as we're living now, burn Cragside to the ground, and never come back to this valley. Call ourselves something else entirely - you could be Rachel, and I could be,... I don't know - Alfred,... or something."

"I don't like Alfred."

"Tobias then?"

"Tobias?"

"All right,... Stephen."

"Stephen, that's better."

"The point is we could be anyone we choose. We are players, masters of disguise"

She thought on this for a moment. "No. Seems to me those names would be like you said: disguises. We would not be escaping. We would be hiding. Beatrice and Joshua aren't hiding. They're facing up to something the only way they know how. They can't ever become ordinary again. I can't be

ordinary any more, Joshua. I am Beatrice, now." The clock struck the half hour. "It's late. Nothing makes sense at this hour. We should go back to bed. Things will seem brighter in the morning."

She was right, I thought, we couldn't leave; we were both captive to whatever was about to unfold.

## Chapter 33

## The lights

The memory of something determined to repeat itself: that's what I'd said, wasn't it? Beatrice was right of course; usually nothing makes sense at 3 a.m., or worse: the most preposterous of ideas seems quite feasible. It is the time of our lowest ebb, the time, as Thomas Hardy once wrote, when fancy stalks as reason. But it was 10 a.m. now, the cold drizzle of the night cleared up to a fine but humid August morning. It was summer in the peak of season, holding its breath as if it dared not move for fear of tipping the balance over into autumn, which it would any day now.

I was sitting out under the willow, more tea at my elbow, and the blank page of the journal before me, along with Ghita's beads, and the Changes. But I'd sat up all night, seen in the dawn, and was, as a consequence, not fit for much at all, my thoughts churning slowly like the rusty gears of an antique clockwork. Still, something about those words rang true: it had all happened before, another time, another universe maybe, and there was an inevitable repetition, not exactly as Neitzche had predicted: an exact duplicate of a life already lived, but one wherein there was a chance to look at things afresh, like the working out of a combination of events that had not yet been tried, a life for ever repeating, but unfolding in a different way each time until the right outcome was attained.

On the first page of my journal, in the code of this place, I had written:

*Joshua married Beatrice for her bohemian ways, for the feeling of danger she aroused in him, and though he loved his cousin Charlotte, he could not leave Beatrice, given the fragility of her mind, and the fact that she carried his child. So for a time he made a mistress of his cousin and played a double game,...*

*But then:*

*Beatrice knew the game he and Charlotte played, knew it was a touching game and did not mind. But at what point in time did Beatrice die at Drummaur Tarn?... Was this before or after the birth of her child? Or was that not a part of this history at all? Was that a part of a previous combination of events, when I - when Joshua - went away to fight the Boer, and did not return? When I left her childless? Unlike now,...*

Thus, from a transient crystal of certain insight, there spawned a myriad infuriating questions. I made to tear the page out, to restore the blank, the unspoken, the uncommitted thought.

"Stop it!" she'd said - the voice from the dream, "Stop thinking and all shall become clear."

What was it then, the full extent of the knowledge, the clarity *She* bore? And how might I get *Her* to share it with me? I had resisted sleep, resisted the possibility of a conclusion to the dream, for dreams are unpredictable things and might take off in unexpected and confusing ways. Similarly I had placed a speculative hand on the Changes, but found I was not in the mood for any more enigmas than confronted me already. It is always a dangerous and grave matter, to summon the unconscious, to demand it makes an explanation of itself, but I hoped it would forgive me this one time. So I set out with a view to summoning back the vision of the night before, of focusing down upon it in a way that discouraged the natural digressions of dream-sleep. To this end, I walked a little way up the valley of Drummaurdale in search of a tree.

The lower reaches of Drummaurdale are heavily wooded, but if one traces a path south, deeper into the hills, it becomes rapidly barren, just undulating green, pockmarked here and there by the drumlins of glacial times, and all walled in by weathered rock, rising precipitously to the fell-tops. It seemed strange then, this was the direction I took, I mean if it was a tree I sought, for surely I would have had greater choice in the other direction, but no: oftentimes it's as well to listen to the irrational voice, for though it may not be so reasonable and articulate as the rational, it can be right just as often.

I found the tree half a mile up the valley, in a deep-worn stream bed - a gnarled oak, beautifully proportioned, its leafy bulk moving in a slow, mesmerising swirl as the breeze caught it. For my purposes it was necessary to approach within fifty meters or so, then the canopy would fill my field of vision. The precise spot was a matter of impulse, but that morning I found my place marked by one of those odd coincidences that we know are more than mere chance. My foot happened to nudge something in the grass : a compass, rather old and soiled from having weathered many seasons in that spot, since it had been lost, dropped by a passing walker. The symbol was unmistakable: a compass, direction, finding one's way. So it was there I sat down in order to regard the tree.

I had told Ellen McBride that the game we played did not spill over into the real world at all, that psyche did not inform reality, but merely our interpretation of it. I had perhaps said that only to avoid contaminating her with my own fears,... a fear that indeed the opposite was true, that the psyche alone dictated the outcome of events, that it clustered coincidences in its vicinity with alarming regularity, that it is the deepest psyche, the subtle mind that posits every detail of what we think of as reality itself. I had needed guidance, and had found a compass, so I sat down. You decide. Me? I did not know, but followed the signs because I had given up on the rational as being any sort of reliable guide to a true understanding of our place.

Tree gazing can be a long business, so it was no surprise I sat down at around eleven, and that by two o'clock I had not moved. What did surprise me though was the swiftness with which the time passed, for those three hours went like as many minutes. It was the motion of the branches I sought, like staring at

glowing coals - the effect is one of the suspension of consciousness, like self hypnotism, and a swift descent into the strange pre-dream, hypnagogic state. I won't trouble you with the dross that clattered through my mind as I sought the place that kept the memory of Drummaur Tarn, and the woman who swam there in the black moonlit water. And before you have a mind to find your own tree, I should warn you it's as well to be patient, for one does not really seek the meaningful corners of one's mind. I could imagine the tarn well enough but that was not sufficient: the image had to come unforced, and willing, for one could never truly demand anything of the unconscious - only sometimes trust that your wishes coincided with its own.

"What is it? What do you want?"

She was sitting on the sentinel stone, drying her hair on a pink towel, with a floral motif. That towel had once belonged to Emily. My wife. Marriage. Marriage of opposites? Syzygy? Coniunctio? So ran the chain of my associations.

"Are we to be married?" I asked, though not out loud.

She looked grave, and shook her head as if impatient at the slowness of my thoughts. "What ails you, Matthew?"

"I've stopped thinking," I said. "I don't plan anything these days. I just blunder from one omen to the next. I was led to understand this is the proper way of conducting myself."

"You're plagued by analytical thoughts, by useless speculation on matters you can have no control over, nor any hope of ever understanding. Such a vision as this has only come about because you have suspended all thoughts. Now, what is it that you want from me?"

"Tell me. Have I done my best for you? Have I balanced myself sufficiently for you?"

"Am I not wise? Am I not powerful? All this is a measure of how well you have balanced yourself."

"It was just that Planer said,..."

"Planer is a fool."

"He's still a part of me. He's my ego and he behaves foolishly, blindly. He's out there now, stalking me, peering into my life, sifting my details with his cold logic and coming up with nonsense."

"Ghita is the key to ridding yourself of Planer," she said. "You still do not own the part of yourself that you have given to Ghita. Take it back from her and give it to me. Then I shall rid the world of Planer's ghost for you."

My heart sank, for I loved Ghita so.

"You know it's true," she went on, "or you would not resist."

I groaned, feeling the valley darken as a cloud took the sun. "Ghita is all I have. She's the only woman who's ever meant anything, since,... since Emily left and took Aaron with her. How can I let her go?"

"You don't know Ghita. She's not real. She's the perfect fantasy. Only when you see someone for who they really are, and not for who you imagine them to be can you truly love them, and value the love they return. You know how powerful we can be, you've felt it in your bones. Withdraw your attachment to this woman, your adoration. You must, or we can never move on, you and I."

"What about Ellen and Beatrice? Do I give them up too?"

"Neither of these women possess you. You see them as they are. They do not weaken me. Your relationship with them is correct."

"But they're both a construct. They are players in this game, like me, like Joshua. I see them as anything *but* who they *really* are. I see only the roles they play. And they mean,.... nothing to me,... nothing beyond the ordinary, raising no emotion, no longing, no bitterness,... nothing."

"But that is the way, my love, the way to what it is you seek. Only through the absence of emotion might we be rewarded."

"Must I sacrifice all emotion, all sense of being human?"

"Ghita has achieved this and has not ceased being human, but rather has become all that is human and more. She desires it also for you. If you would be like her, then act like her."

When you feel the heat and sense the struggle within yourself, you know that Ego is awake and the game is lost. She was right, the nameless one, hauntress of my dreams. What did I fear? Was it the thought of being alone and loveless? I'd been alone now for such a long time anyway. Was it the thought I would never possess Ghita? Surely I knew that to possess such a one as Ghita was impossible. It was not that I would be renouncing her, for I *would* see the Retreat again, seek her counsel on many things because she was my teacher, my one true mistress. It was simply a matter of taking back the energy that flooded from my psyche every time I thought of her, the energy that flowed around her form and lit her soft skin, like Saint Elmo's fire. That energy was mine, and she did not want it. What she wanted was for me to take it back, to stand firm and straight, relinquish once and for all the need to lean upon her.

So ran the analysis, but my heart erased the effort with its heaviness, and I was sure the time was wasted, except as the day drew on, and the tree moved, and one by one I untangled the knots with which I'd bound her, I began to wonder after all if it might not be possible to let her go.

By now the sky had taken on a stormy hue,... white topped clouds soaring fast, deepening shades of blue-grey beneath, plunging the land into cold shadow. There was also an electricity in the air. It seemed to fill my sleeves and it felt ready to spark from my fingertips. It was curious, I thought, and I

could not decide if it were real or something imagined. Then, suddenly the motion of the tree ceased. It was like leaning on a stick to have it suddenly kicked from under you and I stumbled, bracing myself against the swaying of my senses. Then I heard a whispered and urgent: "Go now." So, feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable, I picked myself up and began to trace the valley back to Cragside.

It was a troubling journey and I found myself haunted by an ever growing sense of something stalking me, a terrible creature, the likes of which I dared not gaze upon. It raised the hairs on my neck, but I did not turn to face it. Every step I expected to be overtaken, to feel its unnatural hand upon my shoulder. This was not like me; I had long believed my imagination contained no such night-terrors, but I was left shaken by it, and it was not until I felt the sanctuary of the garden at Cragside under my feet that I was able to recover myself a little. Beatrice met me at the front door, opening it and standing framed there for a while, regarding me with a look of kindness and affection, welcoming me back, but she was suddenly arrested and left gazing in open-mouthed wonder over my shoulder.

"Joshua, my love, whatever's happening?"

I turned then, finally, to face it, to see what it was I'd run from. The valley was by now truncated by a thick blanket of black bottomed cloud, boiling and troubled, and there were lights, like nothing I've ever seen before, rainbow coloured rays fanning from the lower crags like searchlights, strange fingers plunging deep into the black cloud. But most puzzling and frightening of all, there were balls of light, a dozen or so, floating, spiralling, dancing like fireflies and lending a strange dynamic illumination to an otherwise terrible gloom. Everything was silent and still. She came out and took me by the arm, gripped me tight and the two of us remained there, frozen, mute witnesses to a scene from either the end of days or the dawn of time.

Ball lightning, that's all it was! or so Ego whispered. But so freakish a display? So rare a phenomenon, yet so brazenly flaunted in the valley like this? A ball of light broke loose and rode currents of who knows what? drifting inexorably towards us, riding at the level of the treetops. And we watched, still frozen, as it came dipping down into the tunnelled archway of trees at the perimeter of the garden, lighting it from within, like the approach of someone with a lamp. It followed the path, a ball of plasma, silent, carried not quite with the aimlessness of a balloon, but guided, almost by the passage I had cut through the air as I'd walked to where I now stood. I remembered the dream and the feel of the universe parting as my hand moved through it. Could it be? Could I have cut a swathe through space and time like that, for this alien thing to follow?

Beatrice snuggled close, but said nothing. The ball of light, no more than a clenched fist in diameter, had grown dull, like molten metal left to cool, and bore now the yellow-red of several hundred degrees heat. It came within a dozen paces, then rose, gaining brightness and momentum as it soared,

sweeping over the house and up the valley-side until the cloud took it. Then the valley was filled with the shuddering crack of thunder and the heavens flashed green.

We gasped and ducked in unison, held prisoner by the spectacle, but then the rain came down in torrents, and soaked us even before we'd gathered sufficient wits to stumble backwards into the hall. There we stood with the door open for a while as silver stair-rods flashed before our eyes.

"We should close it," I said, eventually, having recovered my breath. "The heat rising from the house might attract the lightning."

So she closed it and leaned back on it, breathless and panting. "The game is frightening now, Joshua."

"It's just a bit of weather," I said, but I was unable to convince even myself that this was normal, that we had not fallen through a trapdoor into a paranormal nightmare.

"Shall we watch the storm, from the front bedroom?" she asked. "I always liked to watch storms from inside, when I was a little girl."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to. I wasn't sure if I dared gaze upon those floating spheres, so alien they were that Ego struggled to reject them now, to deny their existence, to suppress their memory. Just ball lightning, it had said, but ball lightning was barely accepted in scientific circles and would have been rejected all together were it not for overwhelming anecdotal evidence. And even then I'd never heard reports of a multitude of lights - apparently dancing.

The front upstairs room was the smaller of the three bedrooms at Cragside, very pretty in pale yellow and cream. There was a window seat in the bay and this looked out onto the valley, but we could see nothing that evening for the rain and the gloom. Perhaps fortunately for Ego, the spectacle of the lights had passed, and there was only the sound of rain now hammering on the glass.

We sat down in opposite corners, diagonally, knees touching briefly before moving awkwardly apart. Both of us had been cowed by the experience. She shivered.

"Your blouse is soaked. You should change."

"Later."

We had almost to shout in order to make ourselves heard - so ferocious was the rain.

"Heavens, Joshua, I'm sure we shall be washed away!"

"This old house will have seen much worse in its time, Beatrice. It will keep us safe and dry."

"Yes,... yes,..." she shivered once more, then pulled a shawl from the bed and draped it around her shoulders. "You made it back just in time. For sure you would have drowned if you'd delayed another moment."

"I was lucky." But it seemed to me now that things had worked out exactly as they should. What other means could have been employed to get me out of there so effectively as the flooding of my senses with such a blind, irrational terror?

It was a very lovely room, not one I'd spent much time in, and ordinarily it would have been a pleasant place to linger but the spectacle beyond the window had been pushed beyond the fantastic into something unnerving, so by unspoken agreement we retired downstairs into the relative quiet of the kitchen. There a sort of routine took over, we tended the stove and we ate, we drank tea, and listened again to the rain as the dark of the storm merged into the dark of the night.

"It's worse than I've ever known it," she said.

"It hasn't let up for hours. There are sure to be floods."

"I'm cold still," she said. "I think I'll go to bed. I'll feel safer under the covers."

"I'll turn in as well I think - catch up on some sleep."

"Sleep with me? Keep me warm?"

This was not meant in a seductive way of course, as prelude to something else. I knew she'd meant it exactly the way she'd said it - another body beneath the cold blanket, to help warm that snug, private space - the night sanctuary of her bed - and she was not afraid of sleepy cuddles, but I took warning from the fact of my sudden desire to hold her, to feel her body against me, smell the starch of the night-dress, the lavender of her skin and hair,... to slide my hand inside her collar, to peel it over the round of her shoulder and to rest my fingers upon the ripe swell of her breast,... I was struck dumb for a while, as I imagined all of this, and struck dumb also that I could have imagined it in the first place.

"That might not be a good idea just now," I said.

"I feel upset by things that's all," she said, pouting childishly. "There would be no harm in it."

"If it will help, I could sit with you a while."

She brightened a little. "Until I sleep?"

"Very well, yes."

So I waited a while after she had gone up, still listening to the rain, waited until the clock had measured out a half hour before I climbed the stairs and cautiously entered the lavender scented air of her room. She was curled up, beneath the blankets, her face turned to the bedside table upon which she'd set a lamp turned low. It was on that bed I'd made love to Amanda, opened the gate for Beatrice to truly enter the world. I remembered the feel of the bed, the hollows of the mattress, the weight of the blankets,... and Beatrice, dear, sweet Beatrice.

"Leave the light," she whispered, as I drew up a chair.

"All right."

"It's just for tonight. There's something unusual about tonight, Joshua. Something not quite right."

I gave a nod, then sat down, drawing up the watch from my pocket as I did so: ten o'clock. Her eyes rested upon me, and there they stayed. It was a comfortable chair, a rocker with deep cushions, and though I had been certain I would not sleep, I felt the comfort of the chair begin to draw me immediately. And there was something also about the presence of her, of Beatrice and Joshua, at the ending of the day - that strange completeness.

"Are you afraid, Joshua?"

"No, my love."

"Then neither am I."

"Go to sleep, Beatrice. I'm sure it will be a lovely day tomorrow, and all of this will be,.. well,.. like a dream."

There was but a little oil in the lamp; I guessed it would be enough for a few hours, but I only seemed to close my eyes for a second and the light was gone, the room plunged into the black of deepest night, and I could hear her steady breaths, marking out the rhythm of her sleep. I must have slept as well for I felt stiff, and my mouth had a dryness that took a while to clear.

The rain had stopped hammering against the pane, but as I lounged there, slowly coming to my senses, I realised there was something else, something more alarming than the rain. It was a feeling on the very edge of perception, not imagination, but a real physical sensation carried through the fabric of the house itself - the floor, the walls, the sash. It was trembling, and there was a nearby rumbling, like perpetual thunder, like the stampede of a million mad beasts moving down the valley, past the door, and sweeping all before them.

## Chapter 34

## The vision of Beatrice

I searched my self for an irrational fear, but found none, and therefore concluded I was not prevented from investigating this additional strange phenomenon. So, I crept downstairs and slipped out of the back door, taking the storm lamp with me. The rear lawns were deep with puddles, and indeed it was still raining a little, but the rumbling sound drowned out the gentle patter. It seemed to be coming from the back of the house, from the west, where the land rose steeply to the heights of Drummaur Fell, invisible in the darkness. I gazed westwards, then drew back, shocked to see a ghostly apparition looming there, seeming to hang above the treetops, like a crucifix draped with an eerily luminous white cloth. I ducked instinctively and was ready to hide from it when I was rescued by my senses and made to realise it was nothing more than Drummaur Beck in spate.

There was a fall, half way up the fell, about a quarter of a mile away, usually no more than a single modest thread of water, plunging about a hundred feet from a lip of fractured rock, but now,... now it was a stupendous, thundering torrent, and the dreamy beck beside the house had become a maelstrom of churning brown water. And as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I picked out other silver threads, thundering in their own ravines, the length and breadth of the valley, all spewing their weight northwards. It was the movement and the thunder of all this water that I could feel!

A storm! It had only been a storm, and now the fells were emptying themselves, restoring their natural balance like a shaggy terrier shaking outs its fur after a swim. This was not the end of the world! Records for that time bear testament to the truth of the storm, and the following days' newspapers would carry stories and pictures of the extent of the inundation of the valleys, of how the great lakes suddenly rose up and swallowed the little settlements along their shores, of how farms and lone dwellings in the little dales south and east, remained cut off for days. Ball lightning was not mentioned, nor witnessed by anyone, I believe, but for me and the woman who was Beatrice. It was a phenomenon restricted to the boundaries of Drummaurdale, and the vicinity of a lone tree in a deep-cut ravine, where a troubled man had sat down to meditate. The flood would cause inconvenience and material destruction, but no loss of life, and the peculiar focus of that storm would cause no fevered speculation, for we live in troubled times where freak weather has become the norm, and to be honest pretty much the least of our problems.

There was no damage to Cragside, and the beck, though thunderously heavy, seemed in no mood to burst its banks and overwhelm us. I guessed the worst was over then, and I went back inside, to seek my own room and some much needed sleep. Naturally, Ego denied all responsibility for the events of that

day. Ball lightning was a rare thing, not at all understood, yet witnessed often enough to vouch for its existence, but the other side of me wondered, and could not quite shift the feeling that I had somehow been responsible, through my summoning of that inner part of me, and inviting back the energy I had projected onto Ghita. By so doing I had unleashed something else, something quite beyond my imagining.

All of this is ridiculously overblown and melodramatic of course. It was 3 a.m. again and fancy stalking once more as reason, except when the morning came, there was also a change in Beatrice.

I came down to find her in the garden. The sky had cleared and it was a fine, warm morning. She was standing with her back to me, wearing her tweeds and straw boater with a blue ribbon, gazing up the fell to the mighty torrent that was even now only half abated. She turned when she became aware of me and she gave me a look of tender knowing. Here had been a creature half tormented, jumping like a cat at sounds in the night, yet now there stood before me a woman of such serene countenance I could not believe they were one and the same. She was holding her hand out to me, willing me to come and take it.

"How different everything is this morning, Joshua."

"Yes,... you seem different too."

"Oh, you mustn't mind me. I have my good days and my bad days. True, there are days when I jump at nothing, but also other days when nothing can disturb the calm I feel inside."

But it was not her, not the timid creature who had been Beatrice. This was not her voice, not her natural vocabulary. As I drew near, I looked into her eyes. They too were calm and steady, not sliding about and ducking at every turn. She faced me, faced up to me, and gazed proudly back. It was a haunting look.

"Beatrice?"

"Yes,.... it's me."

No! The persona presents itself in many subtle ways: the tilt of the head, the twinkle of an eye, the stretch of a lip,... and I knew this Beatrice by now. I knew her timidity, I knew the nervous quiver in the corners of her mouth.

"Are you?...."

"Draw closer to me, Matthew,... come,..."

Matthew? Was I not Joshua? She lifted up the palm of her left hand, thumb and fingers slightly splayed and my eyes were drawn to a peculiar motif imprinted upon her palm: it was a dragon,... not coiled, but drawn into a neat circle with its open mouth consuming its own tail. It was a mark I knew from medieval literature,... an alchemical symbol, a mandala, the so called Ourobourous. It represented the self, the inner core to which we are all bound.

It represented wholeness, it represented the singularity that was the origin of life and also the gateway to all that lay beyond it.

"Think yourself ready?" she asked, a challenging twinkle in her eye.

"I don't understand."

"Yes you do, Matthew."

"You can manifest yourself as flesh and blood?" I faltered, drawing up in awe.

"Don't be afraid. This is what you want. You want something,... tangible,.. from me. Well, here it is."

"I'm not sure,... not sure what you want from me, not sure I'm capable of grasping your meaning."

She motioned me forward, eyes soft with reassurance. "Touch me," she said. "Your palm to this palm, your fingers to these fingers, your thumb to this thumb."

I did as she asked, and pressed my trembling hand to hers, expecting her to simply melt away at my touch, but she remained solid and warm and incredibly real. For a while we faced each other like that, a small gap between our palms but then she pressed them together and I felt the serpent run up my sleeve. The air opened, turned itself inside out, and, incredibly, I was sitting in a layby, in a car, in a nameless corner of the world, pouring out a flask of coffee while glancing into the eyes of a sweet looking woman who loved me dearly. There were children in the back, bickering and whining,... our children! I felt a pang of love, and frustration, but there was no time to think what it meant because I was also man sitting on a hard bed, with bare walls enclosing him, a man imprisoned for the murder of a child, and then also a woman in a hospital bed facing a white coated clinician who bore bad news - I was strangely accepting of him, though I knew my end was now near,... indeed I was relieved. And then I was a boy of eight with skinned knees who had just fallen from his bicycle in the garden of his parent's home, and a woman in a white dress standing in a church repeating words with a feeling of pride and trepidation, and another woman with a child at her breast, a warm thread running from the child to somewhere deep in my heart,... and a man filled with a strange, deluded hate, planning the death of an arbitrary number of innocent people,.. endless,... endless lives, not sequential but simultaneous. Every thought, every emotion, every mental pattern in the universe, both dark and light, Yin and Yang, sucked through my brain like a short circuit, like a power surge through a weak conductor.

I was able to endure this for no more than a few seconds before blacking out. Any longer and I would surely have been damaged.

I came round some time later in the lap of the Beatrice I knew. She wore a dressing gown over her night-dress and her hair lay in soft drapes over my face. She was frightened, her eyes were swivelling wildly from side to side as if looking out for the devil that had knocked me down, laid me in the puddles

on the lawn, so that I was soaked and shivering.

"Joshua?... Joshua?"

I felt her palm upon my cheek, warm and soft and smooth. I caught it gently and held it - it was bare and white,... perhaps even a different shape of hand, and no marking, no dragon. It had surely been a vision then, or a delusion, an hallucination! How could I ever trust my senses again after this? She had seemed so real!

"I'm,... strange,... that's all." What? What was that I'd just said?

"Are you ill, Joshua?"

Was I ill? I tried to answer but was hopelessly confused, my thoughts racing ahead of my words, my words muddled and incoherent. "Not Joshua,... sliding! Hell,... too much,... Matthew sinking,.. sliding,..."

"Who is Matthew?"

"Outside the game,... Matthew,... drowning. Joshua coming soon back, but Matthew,... please hold Matthew for me now,..."

"You're not making any sense, my love."

"Vision,... burning,... white heat... too much, Beatrice. I'm sorry - it was too much. I could only bear it for a second. It was the dragon. Please be patient with me. I want to do what's right,... I want to do the right thing."

She began to shush me, began rocking me like a baby, held my head to her breast. I felt comforted by her innocence and her simplicity.

"You're so lovely," I said. "So sweet. Joshua does not deserve one so precious as you."

"You're talking rubbish. Let's get you back inside. Let's get you dry."

She helped me to my feet, but I was blinded by dizziness, the world blanking out every time I tried to move my head. She had to guide me back inside, then lead me upstairs to my bed. There she left me, and nothing felt more proper than to simply peel off my mud-caked clothes, collapse back into the duck-down, and fold the covers over me. Was this a gift, I wondered, this glimpse of the truth underlying reality, or was it a curse? Had it been the end of me? Was any of it real, or was it just a sign of my loosening grip on reality, and the strange tricks this house could play.

## Chapter 35

## Thaddeus

Biology is too fragile, too frail to hold the truth, to experience even an approximation of the self. We tend to assume that what we seek is the deepest part of ourselves, a secret and intimate corner of our souls, a place beyond the reach of anyone else. But this is a mistake, and in fact the thing to which we all aspire, knowingly or otherwise, is the one thing we actually share. It is entirely impersonal. We are but one pair of its eyes, one experience of its immense entirety. Beyond a certain level of our discarnate selves there is no person-hood. We are not preserved as individuals, but absorbed back as discrete packets of godliness. This might sound like an unpromising vision of what lies ahead, for we so value our person-hood, but so far as I can tell we approach it gladly.

Beatrice brought me tea, or rather a strange infusion, slightly bitter.

"Just some herbs," she said. "I get them from the hedgerows round here,.. best thing for when you're feeling edgy, like I sometimes do. There's valerian and camomile, and a bit of honey to take the taste away. It might make you sleepy, but it's not like the medicine doctor's will give. It calms you, but leaves your mind alone."

She sat upon the bed and held my hand. I looked at her, mesmerised by her sweetness, and I hated Joshua, hated that he could betray this woman's trust and take a lover instead of loving her! Maybe I was damaged beyond repair but she struck me now as being quite without equal, the most precious prize a man could hope for - deeply feminine, and arousing of everything that was properly masculine.

"Drink up," she said.

The house still trembled with the running of the water, but now it was understood, it was no longer a thing to be feared. Instead I found I could latch onto it, like the primeval Om, base frequency of the inner cosmos. The sound, combined with the sedative infusion, began to slow my pulse and take me down to the threshold of consciousness. I saw her drink the dregs from my cup, then felt her curl up beside me. I was shaken by the way she had lifted the cup to her lips and taken the infusion in, after me. It seemed the most intimate thing, and not quite decent, as if she had drawn the seed from my sex, without so much as blinking.

I slept the day through, not quite breaking the surface, but sometimes coming close enough so that I was able to make an accommodation with my experience. Slowly then I absorbed it through the filter of sleep, so that when I did awake that evening, I could be more easily accepting of things, even though I did not understand them.

Ghita had once described her belief in the totality of consciousness, the idea that we were each a part of the whole, but by virtue of the fact that we each saw the world through a personal pair of eyes, it was easy to believe ourselves alone and isolated. Ghita had been brought up in the Hindu tradition, and so had less difficulty with this belief than did I, a wee tweed Englishman, and severely lapsed Anglican. It was also impossible, she had said, for her to think of life as being finite. She told me she believed there would be endless rebirth, the swapping of one pair of eyes for another, which was also something the wee tweed Englishman could not reconcile, until now.

I came around in the late evening, to find Beatrice still curled into me, the tip of her thumb held to her lips, the pair of us snug and warm. She had lit a fire and the logs crackled comfortably. Outside was strangeness and uncertainty. Inside was safety and security,... and Beatrice. Innocence! It all came down to innocence, for in innocence there is comfort. Nothing can destroy us if we are truly innocent. Therein lay the secret of her preciousness.

"Better now?" she asked.

"Better,... yes. I seem to be less confused at least."

Gently she stroked my arm. "You were very confused, Joshua."

I still was. What was the purpose of the self, I thought? What was it doing, sucking in all this information? all these emotions? all this data from every life that it had ever lived? And was my glimpse an indication that it was somehow connected to the event I was so sure by now was coming? An event orchestrated by the archetype that was Beatrice?

Whatever it was, I thought, it was bound to finish me, for I asked too many questions and thought too many thoughts, to be accused of innocence. This sweet, innocent woman would survive it, but I would not. This house would also survive, and if anyone belonged in it, then it was her, and not me. I would bear this thing witness, and perhaps gain a momentary enlightenment before my death, which meant I had to make the house over to her, secure a life for her, beyond Matthew Rowan, beyond Joshua, beyond the game,... but how could I do that if I didn't know who she was?

"I suppose it must be getting up for bedtime," I said. "Though I've slept so much I feel like I'm on the wrong shift now."

"Perhaps if we stayed up a while, it would help to get us back to normal."

"Yes."

"We could walk a little, if you feel up to it."

"Won't it be dark soon?"

"The sky's clear. There should be enough light to make our way."

"Yes, a night walk. But we'll have to be careful."

"I can find my way blind, Joshua."

"I wasn't meaning the natural hazards, the crags and such. I was meaning more that we should be careful to read the omens. Reality seems an increasingly negotiable concept at the moment"

"I didn't understand half of what you just said, Joshua, but I do know about omens. And we needn't go far."

Not far was a little way up the side of Drummaur Fell. There was a half moon and stars clustered like luminous coral. The path followed the course of the beck, but we traced it no more than a hundred feet above the thunderous fall before sitting down upon a flat rock in order to observe the night. It was stunning! Barely fifty miles south of here the urban pollution was so great that few people ever saw anything but the very brightest of stars, and certainly few alive these days ever took the trouble to witness such a sight as this,... indeed few of us could even be bothered lifting our eyes to the moon any more. We knew so much, but we had also forgotten how to feel!

As we sat there, stars began to shoot across the sky. It was the Perseid meteor shower that reached its peak about that time of year. We had lost all primitive superstition about such things. We had deduced a label for the phenomenon and no longer felt such dread awe at its mystery. But in our understanding we had also lost touch with something equally important. The longer I lived, the less it seemed I valued this understanding of things, and the more I valued the feeling of what it meant to be a human being, simply bearing witness to life.

While we sat there, Beatrice asked me if I knew what caused the stars to fall, to streak across the sky. I told her it was dust, burning in the high atmosphere, a regular thing, caused by the breaking up of a comet at the dawn of time, conscious all the while that I was devaluing the experience, and the sense of magic for her.

"It's not an omen then?"

"I don't think so."

The fells appeared like an ink-black silhouette against the midnight blue and the frosty illumination of the heavens, but to the north there was also a greenish glow that hugged the far horizon. As the night drew on, bands of an eerie luminescence stroked the sky.

"And that?" she asked.

"The Aurora Borealis," I replied. "I've never seen it this far south before."

"Not an omen either?"

"Strange,... and beautiful, but no, not an omen, at least I don't think so."

"There is no beauty without eyes to see, my love."

"That's true, yes,... eyes to see and ears to hear. Indeed can any of it be said to exist unless there's at least one man or woman left alive to bear it witness?"

"Well, who cares if it exists or not when we're all dead and gone?"

"You don't believe we get more than one chance at life then?"

"Me? No. Once is enough, and anyway pretty soon this old earth's going to die, and where will all your souls go then, waiting to be reborn?"

"That's a fair point,... What about heaven then? Don't you believe in that?"

"Nooo! That's just wishful thinking too."

"I suppose you could describe the whole of religion as wishful thinking. So you believe there'll be an apocalypse?"

"Don't know what you'd call it, Joshua, but you don't need much intelligence to see there's a whole lot of trouble in the world. There always has been, and for all our fancy talk its not getting any better is it?... getting a lot worse if you ask me. Time was when a bad man needed a whole army of bad men to kill a thousand good people. Now he can do it on his own, a thousand,... ten thousand,... Don't even need to be a bad man any more,... just stupid."

"It's pretty grim I'll grant you, but we seem to limp along all right, don't we?. Don't lose your faith, don't lose that precious innocence and become a cynic, like me, Beatrice. There are enough cynics in this world."

"I'm not the little girl you think I am, Joshua. Not a simpleton."

"I don't consider you to be a simpleton."

"Then what?"

"I'll admit to picturing you as a little girl,... that seems the closest I can get to describing you,... but there are some clever little girls, and of course they're still innocent. And really Beatrice, your innocence is something to be treasured."

She thought about this for a while, not altogether pleased, I thought, by the way she pouted. And then she said: "Had a hairy pussy for a long time, Joshua, so I'm not a little girl any more - all right? Feels good when I rub my finger on its button too, so I'm not really that innocent either."

I decided it was safe to respond in an equally indelicate manner: "But have you had a lot of men inside that pussy of yours?"

She took a while answering and I was afraid I'd offended her, but she was just thinking. "No, 'course not. Men trouble me, Joshua. Some have come close, but then backed away when they got what they wanted. You see me from a distance and I look like other women, even pretty maybe, but up close you can tell I'm not normal. Last one got close enough of course. Didn't want him to. Wanted him to leave me alone. And then he seemed to hate everything about my prettiness so much he tried to destroy it."

"I suspect it was nothing to do with hate, Beatrice. It was fear perhaps. It's true you're not like other women."

"Say it: I am a simpleton. I know that's what other's call me. Called me worse

when I was at school. That's why normal men run away in the end. You're right. It frightens them."

"You're a little strange, but then who's to say what's normal? As to what it is that frightens men away, I'd say it's your innocence, and the knowledge that they can never corrupt it, never turn you into a worldly woman. Your innocence insults them. It insults their hunger for the erotic. They don't understand it. And so they fear it."

She seemed moved by what I'd said: "You too?" she asked.

"Of course, yes."

"Then why are you sitting up here in the dark with me? Why did you not run away?"

"If you recall, I did run away. When I saw you that time at the tarn, and you knew me, knew my name. I've never felt such fear."

"But that was different. You didn't know me properly then. You didn't know I had become Beatrice - your wife!"

"I knew it was you. I just ran because I didn't understand."

"And you understand it now? Is that why you're not afraid?"

"No, I don't understand it at all. I've just stopped thinking about it, stopped questioning it. That's why I'm not afraid."

Beatrice placed a hand on her abdomen. "Ooh!"

"Are you all right?"

"Baby's kicking." She took my hand and slipped it beneath her overcoat.

"Feel it?"

"Beatrice,..."

"Say you feel it, Joshua. Please say you feel it!"

"I feel it."

"Want to know what I wish, my love?"

"Tell me."

"That it had been you, for my first time,... someone who could be gentle. Treat things right. But no one was ever really gentle and now,... after that last time it's all spoiled. Do you understand?"

"Beatrice,... something like that,... it harms you in so many different ways, but you will overcome it. It takes time, years maybe, but you will overcome it. There are gentle men, men who will cherish you."

"None so gentle as you, Joshua. It can only ever be you now. You know that."

"Can you,... tell me his name,.. this man who hurt you?"

She thought on this for a long while. "Thaddeus," she said eventually.

The name struck me. At first I did not understand why until I remembered that in the legend of Joshua, first spun a decade ago, Thaddeus had inherited the family farm and so, for want of a living Joshua had enlisted with the army and gone off to fight the Boer.

Thaddeus was Joshua's brother! Thaddeus was Mr. Darkside. Thaddeus had lusted after Beatrice, been jealous of her attachment to his younger brother, and while she waited for his return from the war, he had thought to court her, to win her from Joshua. But after she spurned his advances, he had exacted a terrible revenge, and his angry, loathsome seed had sparked the fledgling life within her. Then Joshua returned home to find his woman carrying a child that was not his own.

Like Matthew had done with Emily - except Emily had taken the seed of her lover willingly.

I'm not sure how all this came into being, only that it streamed into my head unbidden. But there was a disconcerting strangeness to it, because it had not happened to Beatrice. It had happened outside of the game, and she had escaped into Beatrice. How fluid, how unfixed, how unstructured was this fantasy to be? It was as if a small hole had opened up and a bit of reality had leaked inside the dream!

"Beatrice, you know Thaddeus is Joshua's brother."

She was silent for a while. "No,.. I don't think I want him to be your brother. Why must he be your brother?"

"I don't want him to be my brother either. But in a story told to me a long time ago, Joshua had a brother called Thaddeus."

"Then it must be true," she said, "but I don't want it to be,..."

Her voice trembled. The significance of this was overwhelming for her. It meant we had no choice but to bring the thing she most feared, the thing she wanted to hide from, inside the game.

"It's not safe,... not safe to do this!" she said.

"Why that name? Where did you get that name from, Beatrice?"

"It was his name, Joshua. That was his *name!*"

"Very well, let's not talk about it any more. Perhaps we're wrong about it."

"Yes, let's not talk about it."

Not talking about it was the same as hiding from it, and of course this was not something that would go away. That one revelation was the whole point of the night's walk. Forget the stars and the aurora: It was Thaddeus who eclipsed them all!

Matthew had been angry beyond belief at Emily's betrayal, and Ego had

wanted to go out and kill the man who'd pawed the flesh he'd considered to be his personal property. Later though, he'd been able to view it for what it was,... an affair of the heart. He had been unable to satisfy Emily, to make her feel warm and safe,.. so what had happened had been inevitable in a way. And Aaron had been the result of a crazy passion, deliciously elicit, at least for them. There had been no evil intent, and the only casualty had been my pride. So I had kept quiet, swallowed my anger and gone along with her deceit. Let her believe, I believed the child was mine.

What disturbed me most of all, now though, was the realisation that here,... here in beautiful Drummaurdale, beneath these stars, there stalked a terrible evil.

"We needn't worry, Joshua. Thaddeus is gone now. He's not coming back."

I said nothing for fear of alarming her, but I knew Thaddeus would return. He was the missing player and only he could complete the game.

## Chapter 36

## The nature of evil

We are all very wise, we New Age seekers of the Truth, we who thumb our noses at what we see as the archaic and naive concepts of organised religion. We latch ourselves on to all manner of alternative beliefs, but in dismissing the ancient sacred teachings for what we say are their outmoded psychological models, we also dismiss the concept of evil. We say that evil does not exist, and can argue it comfortably away in spite of all the carnage in the world. We blame it on something else: on chance, on degenerate genes, on upbringing, but generally on something we can analyse and expound upon in ways that fit the rules of our political correctness.

We no longer call it evil.

Comfortable lives we have lived, most of us, we children of the late twentieth century Western Europe and United States, we children of the age of Aquarius, never touching evil, never witnessing its works at first hand, only through the medium of our television screens, and then selectively. But evil *does* exist as any city policeman's log will tell you - the full spectrum of human depravity, Ellen McBride called it, the willingness of a few to harm others in the most unspeakable manner, not as collateral damage in their search for monetary gain at any cost, but simply for the pleasure of it. And the danger of evil is at its height when we believe only in the goodness of man, and in the goodness of ourselves.

I admit at this point I'm guilty of a cardinal sin: I note from my guidebook of fictional construction that one should have introduced all the key players of a story in the very first chapter, and here we are, at number thirty six with a key player still missing. Except,... though you may be forgiven for not yet realising it, you are in fact already well acquainted with Thaddeus.

I sound so indignant, so shocked, so insufferably pure, so sure I could never have treated a woman the way Thaddeus treated Beatrice. But think the exact opposite of what I tell you, and you have Thaddeus, for I am Thaddeus, as I am Joshua and Matthew. It was me who took an evil delight in the cruel humiliation of the very innocence I so nobly claim to cherish. And in denying I am capable of such a thing I actually diminish Joshua, and embolden Thaddeus, for Thaddeus likes nothing more for us to pretend he does not exist.

Christians talk about sin - but it's misunderstood, and all too often denied. What me? No, I am without sin, without so much as a prurient thought in my head, or a jealous bone in my body. But to deny it is to give strength to the darker side, to the shadow-side of one's nature. We are, in fact, all of us capable of the most terrible things, for we are all human. All that saves us is

the choice we are granted, either to act or not to act upon our base impulses.

I thought I had slain Thaddeus a long time ago, reasoned him out of my head, but we were destined to meet again. As it transpired, there was not long to wait, and in fact I encountered Thaddeus just a few short weeks after the revelation of his existence. We had eaten all our food by then, and it was this most basic of fixes that required a sobering return to the twenty first century, more specifically to Booths' supermarket at Windermere. I had planned ahead for such an eventuality, making sure the Landrover, which Amanda's Beatrice had kept hidden a little way off in the woods, was taxed, insured, MOT'd and capable of making the journey into town. We were a queer looking pair then, stepping out of the old, lichen stained vehicle, me dressed like a hundred year old man, and Beatrice like a complete loon on account of her pristine antiquity and her graceful carriage.

Strange to say, though, we did not appear to attract attention as we bumbled like novices up and down the aisles with our trolley. Indeed, we appeared to pass unseen, like ghosts. Perhaps I had been oversensitive to the possibility of ridicule in the first place, and perhaps the majority of people are naturally accommodating of other's differences. Perhaps it was still acceptable to be eccentric, I thought.

By far the biggest problem, for both of us, was the sheer press of people, and the noise, and the colour, and the glare of the contemporary world. Our world, the world of Cragside, and Drummaurdale contained infinitely more space. Our world was fifty square miles of grey mountain and green vale, and the two of us the only sentient beings in it.

We had completed our purchases, stowed them in the vehicle, and I had managed to coax a reluctant Beatrice back inside, into the cafeteria, where we both drank an incongruous Cappuccino. My reasons were entirely selfish. I wanted to experiment, to see if what I felt was embarrassment or pride at being with her among others from that former time I had once called my own. The results were inconclusive and in the end I felt confused, still unable to foresee any logical outcome to our relationship, even though it seemed we were married. I mentioned to her my resentment of the presence of others, after so long alone, and she surprised me by telling me it was not healthy to withdraw from people.

"We need others, Joshua," she said simply.

"Do we? I feel I could manage without them quite happily."

"No. Look what being alone has done for me."

"It's just that my fate always seems to have kept me from others. Even when I'm among them, I'm not with them. I cannot connect with others, Beatrice."

"Yes you can, Joshua. It's just that the connections you make are fewer. Others, they scatter themselves all over the place, blathering nonsense all the time, connecting carelessly. But you? You're searching for something.

searching serious, like a hunter stalking. Serious hunters don't make noise, don't want scatter. Serious hunters want only the right connections. That's what you are Joshua. You're a serious hunter."

"Pity then, I'm such a poor shot."

She did not respond to my joke and I assumed she had not understood my humour, but then I realised she was staring fixedly at a man who sat opposite, a few yards distant. And from the look in her eye, from the mixture of terror and hatred I saw written in her face, I understood at once that this was Thaddeus.

I said that you were already well acquainted with this man and I did not mean this entirely in a metaphysical sense. I had not seen him for a decade, and though he was but barely glimpsed in those far off days, I recognised him now from his former guise as the Lizard Man of the Seven Sisters Camp Site.

"My God!" I thought. It was the pattern, the symmetry, you see? The Lizard Man was my brother, even then!

He was still a big man, big chest, big hands,... crushing hands. He must have been in his late fifties now. He wore a thin shirt, open almost to his navel, and he sat with the airs of one who thought a good deal of himself, his voluminous belly thrust forwards like a symbol of his status. I remembered his loathsome attitude, as he's uttered to me the three night mantra, and the slovenly, take-it-or-leave it sneer as he had dismissed me from his presence, dismissed me into the arms of Beatrice. He had a sinister presence, and I began then to understand the significance of this man to our game for I realised at once how suddenly and how strongly I projected every ounce of loathing in my soul upon him - things I had thought were dealt with years ago, sensitivities healed, vulnerabilities rebuilt - but it all came crashing down at the mere sight of him.

I hated him with an irrational passion that cast my mind in deepest shadow and set my body trembling. I was shaken by this for normally I could behold loathsomeness with neutrality and an emotionless, analytical eye.

He stared at her openly, thin lips moist and leering, or so I fancied. I was dizzy with hatred of him by now, thinking of weapons; of knives, of guns. Then I caught myself and remembered to breathe. I broke the surface of my shock like one who had almost drowned, and I drew in a long breath of air.

"Beatrice, my love, take the keys now and go back to the car."

She had grown pale and her hands were trembling. She did not move.

"Beatrice, go back to the car."

Still she did not move.

"Why is he there, Joshua?" she whispered. "Why am I looking at him? Why must he spoil this?"

"I don't know, my love. Sometimes, there's just no understanding these things,... but there's always a purpose to them."

"Talk plain for me Joshua! Why am I looking at him again! Was it because we spoke of him? Did we cast a spell and wake him up?"

"I don't know,... it's an,... unfortunate coincidence, that's all. Just get up slowly and gracefully, and go back to the car."

"You know him too?"

"I met him once,... very briefly, and it shocks me that I can still remember him. That too seems to be rather an unfortunate coincidence."

She did as I asked, a picture of calm and grace. His eyes followed her, as did the eyes of other men, but theirs were admiring, arrested perhaps by her mystery, by the enigma of this oddly dressed woman, while his were dangerous, filled with malevolence. I would have thought he'd learned his lesson the first time and I admired the sheer pluck of the girl for getting near enough to this sweating hulk of a man with a carving knife. It frightened me too, for she must have been blind and wild with fury not to think of the obvious risk of that knife ending up plunged into her own breast.

It was a while before he woke up to the fact that I was studying him. My objectivity had returned somewhat and I found he was indeed a comically repulsive creature: ugly and brutish, a faded tattoo on his hairy forearm - indeed he was everything I was afraid of being, both psychologically and physically. As a portrait of my own shadow, Thaddeus was perfect in every respect.

"What?" he demanded.

I did not reply, I was too much in awe of the moment and my sense of his repugnance.

"What?" he repeated, his demeanour like that of a closing-time drunkard spoiling for a fight. I blinked and looked aside, for he was pure Yang, hard and brittle, and so better met by yielding than by force. I drained my cup and followed Beatrice outside.

She was standing by the Landrover, hugging herself, holding herself together. "I wish he hadn't seen me like this," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I love these clothes, and now I shall have to burn them. I should have worn jeans and a sweater or something. It was stupid coming dressed like this - but I didn't want to risk going back to being,... someone else."

"I love those clothes too, Beatrice, and there's no need to burn them."

"But they feel dirty. I feel dirty." She pulled at her sleeve and at her skirt. "You can see the stains on them,... his filth. You can see them Joshua!"

She was trembling , her eyes darting from side to side, head cowed, voice brittle.

"Listen, we shall go home. I shall collect lavender from our garden while you run a bath. Then you will sprinkle the lavender into the water, and you will bathe in it until the scent cleanses you. And you shall sprinkle the lavender into your clothes as you fold them - let its purifying scent lift all trace of him away. Do you understand? Our magic is stronger than his. He cannot make any part of us dirty."

"Can't he? Is it true Joshua? Can we magic this away, like you said?"

"I believe we can. And if we believe it, then anything is possible. Come on, let's go back to Cragside."

She nodded weakly, then stepped up into her seat. "I don't like this game any more," she said.

Nor did I, I thought. I had been prepared for the danger of losing my mind, for all manner of psychological hazards, for that was the story of my life, negotiating the booby trapped labyrinth of my own peculiar psychology. But the physical danger this man represented left me nonplussed. Whatever was I to do with him?

Any wishful thinking that he might not after all be part of this story evaporated when I saw him crossing the carpark, one leg noticeably stiff from the wound Beatrice had inflicted upon him. He climbed into a big Japanese off-roader, and without a trace of subtlety, proceeded to follow us out of town.

What? Was I supposed to kill him? Surely, this was a more subtle game than that! What revelation could possibly be worth the waiting for, if it first of all required a blood sacrifice?

Beatrice looked pale and ill, and shrunken. "He means to murder me, Joshua!"

"Will you let me take you away from here? We can be in Manchester in a few hours. I have friends there who can look after you, while I sort this thing out."

"I can't. I can't be away from the house. It's the only place I feel safe. The only place I can hold myself together."

"Does he know you're there? Does he know about Cragside?"

"No,.. no one knows about the house. Only,.. the other Beatrice,... Only she knew I,... spent time there. It was our secret."

"Then we should aim to keep it that way," I said, at the same time thinking it was inevitable he would be led there by something, an event, a coincidence over which we had no control.

"I'd feel better if you were in Manchester. There's this place,... no one knows it exists, it's quiet, deep in a forest, remote from the world. You could stay there for ever and powerful people would protect you."

She recoiled from the very thought. "No! Take me back to Cragside. Take me now, Joshua!"

There was to be no hiding,... of course there wasn't. Did I think I could run from the contents of my own head?

I drove very slowly, a cloud of diesel belching from the exhaust, filling the rear view with a chemical haze - and Thaddeus, the Lizard Man rode on our tail as surely as if he were being towed. I drove from Windermere, along the busy, lumbering road, through Ambleside and Grasmere, then up the long incline of Dunmail. I was taking us away from the valleys that concealed our world, hoping he would grow bored. But there was no time to really think it through, so suddenly had Thaddeus materialised and latched himself onto us, pushed his way into our narrative, mute and brutish, his intentions entirely unknown.

"Beatrice, how do you know him? What is your history with this man?"

"Outside the game, Joshua. Outside the game!"

Beyond Dunmail, beyond Thirlmere, there is a pull-in, and it was here I brought the Landrover to a squealing halt. I had wanted to prevent him from following us back to Cragside, gambling foolishly that by driving up and down, he might run out of fuel before we did, and so be forced to call off his peculiar pursuit. But that seemed a ridiculous plan now, and so I'd stopped. There was no one else around, and the lake was black, the dark, forested mountains all around us, truncated by a boiling mist. I stepped out to face him, to reason with him if possible, but he set off at once, apparently intent on mowing me down, swerving only at the last moment, so that his mirror clipped my arm. His bumper also clipped the Landrover jarring it aside so that Beatrice cried out in alarm. Then he simply drove away.

I was kneeling, clutching my arm, dizzy with the pain, and thinking it was broken, when she came to me and the two of us huddled there, beside our inadequate little vehicle, beneath the cold grey sky and with the emptiness around us.

"I've done something wrong," I said. "I don't know what it is, but it's not meant to be like this."

"No, no, my love. It's not you. It's me,... It's me he wants to hurt, not you."

"But he cannot hurt you," I said, "without hurting me. And he cannot get to you without first coming through me."

We were not followed for the rest of the way, and having last seen us at Thirlmere, the beast that was Thaddeus, could not possibly have linked us to Cragside some twenty miles away across a dozen deep dales and lakes. Nor could he even have known of its existence, but for the first time I no longer felt secure there and that was more disturbing than anything.

Leaving the Landrover at the end of the track, in its little shelter of trees, we

carried our provisions in a motley assortment of bags and baskets to the house - none of the omnipresent plastic carrier bags, for they are the ultimate contaminant. Meanwhile, the mountains moaned. They were grey and wreathed in tendrils of white smoke. It was not customary to lock the door behind us at Cragside, on account of Beatrice's neurosis, but she locked it then, locked out the glowering hills, and sank beside the stove, there to stare vacantly at the coals. So nearly was she lost.

It took every last grain of faith now to go on believing things would naturally work out for the best, that what we were to bear witness to meant only good and not harm.

"Go and run your bath," I said, afraid of her becoming ever more withdrawn and falling into the worst kind of mental sickness. "I'll pick some lavender."

She nodded, brightening a little . "I don't think I'll go to the shops with you again for a while, Joshua. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Now go on up."

Lavender grew in abundance at Cragside, indeed a proper gardener would have said there was too much, that it's mauve and blue dominated the garden and drowned out the more muted tones of its other perennial blooms, but I was of the opinion that one could never have too much l of the stuff and was grateful now for its scent as I ran my fingers through the sun-dried heads, plucking them off. I soon had a handful, and made for the little cabin where I recalled there was a wicker-basket that I could use to carry them. But opening the door, my shock at what I saw was sufficient to make me drop everything.

There, sitting on an upturned bucket amid the gardening tools , like a hideous gnome was the sickeningly rancid Planer.

"Want me to kill him for you?" he said.

## Chapter 37

## The innocence of Beatrice

"You'd better shut the door," he went on. "If that twitchy lady of yours sees me, there'll be real trouble."

So I closed the door and sat in the semi-darkness of the cabin, facing my ego.

"He can be made to disappear," he went on. "It wouldn't be the first time I've arranged something of that nature."

"Are you by any chance saying this to remind me of the precariousness of my own existence?"

"No, no,.. that's far too subtle for me, Mr. Rowan. I'm here to warn you that this man is a very real danger to you and to this woman."

"I think I've already worked that out, but I'm puzzled: why should you care?"

"Because you are my property. I must keep you alive until I've done with you. As for the woman, well she brought this on herself by not pressing charges after he assaulted her. Now, it's unlikely the local force can touch him until the day they arrest him for her murder - since it's unlikely you have it in you to keep her safe yourself. She has my sympathy on account of her innocence and your inadequacy, but there's very little I can do about it."

"Why give me the choice? Why didn't you have someone run him off the road and into the damned lake before he tried to break my arm? Why present me with the option? Why pretend to give me some control over things? "

"I thought you might enjoy the moral conundrum."

"Conundrum?"

"Yes: do you stoop so low, if only to protect her? Or do you take the moral high-ground and trust in fate, when it might so easily get her killed?"

"Why are you here! Go home, you're not needed."

But he did have a point.

Planer grinned. "Are you saying you don't want him taken care of?"

Yes, yes of course I wanted him taken care of! Everything Planer had said was true. I could not protect myself from Thaddeus and I could not protect Beatrice. But one's ego cannot deal with one's shadow, except by recognising that each is the antithesis of the other. And does such a thing have any meaning when following The Code could get us both killed?

"You don't know what you're dealing with," I said. "You can't just kill him. If you try he'll come back twice as strong, twice as angry in the body of someone else. Then I'm truly finished, and without me you'll have no one to

keep an eye on. Without me you're nothing. Without me you have no purpose, no meaning!"

Planer blew out his cheeks and gave a long sigh. "You put your case convincingly, but I remain of the opinion that you haven't a clue what you're talking about. I've always found a bullet to the brain followed by a tidy cremation a very effective method of preventing someone from coming back."

"He is not to be harmed. I must deal with Thaddeus in a way that is entirely correct."

"Mr. Rowan, you are a nut, and he is a sledgehammer. There is only one possible outcome. Nuts do not deal with sledgehammers,... it's simply not the way of things."

As he spoke I began picking up the lavender from the floor and tossing it into the basket, but he cautioned me not to use it, to go out and pick some more. "You're not thinking Mr. Rowan. It's dirty now, mixed with dust and mouse droppings. I know you don't believe in thinking things through properly any more, but sometimes, I assure you, it does have its advantages."

"Yes,... yes, I suppose you're right. If you don't mind my saying so, you seem different. Less,... "

"What? Less intimidating? Perhaps I'm resting that side of me today. But fear not, I have no intentions of letting you go through with this business. I am merely giving you rope, do you understand? I am interested in squashing flat whatever crawls out from under the stones you overturn, in what you think of as your quest. And when there are no stones left, and everything's in ruins, it'll be your turn to be squashed. Then we'll have things back to normal - you'll see."

"You're wrong. You thought you had control. You thought you could make my harem dance to your tune - isn't that what you said? But it didn't work with Ellen McBride. You're floundering."

"True, that woman is a liability, and you can rest assured I shall deal with her in the fullness of time. As for what the two of you get up to behind closed doors these days, well, she'll grow wise to your charlatanism, and then you'll have her to deal with as well as Thaddeus, and believe me, Mr. Rowan, I would sooner take my chances with him."

"A charlatan will never admit to being mistaken, even when exposed, Inspector. Me? I'm sure of nothing. It's you who's the charlatan - you who thinks you can describe an unknowable landscape with your rules."

"We need rules if we are to navigate, Mr. Rowan. How are we to navigate a landscape without rules, without fixed points of reference, without known stars to steer ourselves by?"

"That's easy, Inspector. You just close your eyes."

Again the sigh: "Yes,.. well, I've wasted enough breath on you for one day.

And your lady is waiting for her lavender, remember?"

So I picked fresh lavender, but slowly,...

When I returned to the house, I climbed the stairs towards the bathroom, from where I heard the sound of running water suddenly stop, followed by a gentle splash.

"Beatrice?"

"Have you brought the lavender, Joshua?"

"Yes."

"Then sprinkle it over me."

I hesitated "You're in the bath?"

There was a pause. Then came the slightly hesitant reply: "Yes, but it's all right. Sprinkle it, my love."

"Are you not afraid? I thought you always had to have a clear line of escape?"

"That was a long time ago, Joshua. Now I don't mind so much,"

"Beatrice, I'm not sure I can look at you - I mean undressed. It would change the game too much for me."

"Please," she said. "I don't like rules that stay the same. Sometimes the game must change its rules if it's to have any meaning."

So I entered to find her in the water, a soft and shapely form, eyes askance, hands braced against the side of the bath, fearful, vulnerable. I caught my breath at the sight of her, for she was so very lovely.

"Closer," she said, still avoiding my eyes. "Now kneel and look at me. Just look,..."

My heart was pounding, cracking fearfully against my ribs. "Beatrice,... I can't. This is too much."

"Look at me. See me. Know my shape, Joshua. The more it enters your head the more it leaves *his*. Do you understand? He was the last to see me undressed. That's right, now look at me. Do you see how you are rescuing me now?"

"You're so lovely, Beatrice, so clean, so innocent - for all he tried to do to you."

My eyes were inevitably drawn to her belly as I tried to discern the truth about her pregnancy. There was a roundness, but it was impossible to say if was simply her normal shape or not. If she was pregnant, the child had barely begun to show.

Then, to my horror she lifted her thighs and opened her legs a little to expose her sex, the folds of which she parted with her fingers.

"No, don't turn away - look at me - this part of me. Do you see it?"

"Yes."

"And do you say I am still innocent?"

"What? You mean your,... maidenhead? Your maidenhead is torn, Beatrice, but we are more than flesh,... and you are still innocent."

"You say such nice things, Joshua."

"Shall I put the lavender in the water?"

She nodded, still without looking directly at me. And so I put the lavender in the water, my senses lifted by the release of its aroma into the steam and heat of the bathroom. She gave a sigh, and drew the water over her, peppering her skin with the little flower-heads. The scent was pure and clean. It stripped away the stains of the world to leave her body once more pale and pure.

"There now,..." I said. "All trace of him is gone!"

"Yes,... how powerful your magic is. But tell me, do you still see a little girl, when you look at me, now?"

"When I look into your eyes, yes. When I hear your voice, yes."

"And when I lie in your bed?"

"Yes,... yes. All of that. But what am I meant to do? What am I meant to feel? What is to be the outcome of this, Beatrice?"

"I don't know, my love, but soon winter will come. Dark evenings in this old house, just you and me."

She ran a hand over her ambiguously rounded tummy. "Come spring, maybe all your questions will be answered," she said. "Come spring, the child will be born."

The sight of her body haunted me. It did not sound as if she had ever known physical love - sex certainly, but from men who had ill treated her, used her merely as a passing vessel for their own lust. She was a mature woman, now,... in her thirties, but seemed never to have drawn pleasure from the feel of a man, from the physical loving of a caring and constant man. What was my purpose if it was not to be that man for her?

They say our thoughts are private, but it isn't so. In an enclosed space, two people trapped are perfectly transparent to one another. I felt the atmosphere change, felt the scent deepen and darken,... become musky and charged with a certain hunger.

"No, my love." Her eyes glared a warning and her arms moved to cover her breasts and her mound.

I was alarmed: "I'm sorry. It was just a fleeting thought. Nothing was meant by it. I'll go now."

Was my task then to look upon her loveliness, and feel not a trace of desire? To embrace her, the both of us naked, and feel nothing but the warm satisfaction of our innocence: to press myself against her and not have my sex rising for the imagined delight of her? Was such a thing even remotely possible?

I left the bathroom and went downstairs, went out into the cold and the grey and the mist of what remained of the day, went back to the garden shed and burst open the door, thinking to expose my ego once more, but all I saw was the old wardrobe containing the musty, decaying fragments of Amanda Fleetwood, and memories of a reality that might never have been.

What I needed most at that moment was to get myself away somewhere, up on the hills, behind a veil of mist, where the wind blew strong and could give me the psychological equivalent of a good slapping. But I dared not leave the house, dared not leave Beatrice here alone, so I sat instead by the stream and drew myself down into a state of calm by meditating upon the thunder of the water.

It came to me then that Amanda had first given birth to the notion of Beatrice a decade ago, and that in turn the Beatrice I had once known had passed on her mantle to the Beatrice I now knew. Each of these beings were a deeper expression of the spirit that haunted this valley, each more fragile, more sensitive, each moving further away from the worldly Amanda, a tale moving perhaps with each retelling ever closer towards the original, towards the intended.

How portentous then that the present Beatrice carried something inside, a child she believed,... as impossible as that seemed to me then, but certainly something was gestating, something to be born come spring, but whether physical or metaphysical I could not foresee. She had had lovers, her simplicity had not consigned her to maidenhood, but Thaddeus, the lizard man, had not impregnated her with anything other than fear and loathing.

## Chapter 38

## The chains of Beatrice are broken

It is one thing to hanker after tranquillity, to dream of one's desert isle, far from the press of mankind's madness, but it's quite another to live its day to dayness. Indeed true isolation can be a grindingly lonesome business. One is humbled by it, and in being so humbled one is perhaps granted the best chance of ever gaining the inner eye. That is the intrinsic value of solitude, but its lessons can be hard, and they can, on occasion, be very frightening.

When I took to my bed that night I was afraid, and it was a fear that fed upon itself because I knew only too well how any emotions tended to be taken by that house and amplified in one's dreams. Happiness became euphoric, so that one did not want to awaken from the pleasures of the night. But fear! Harbouring fears could plunge one easily into the depths of unimaginable torment. Thus it was I lay awake in the darkness for a long time, listening to the sounds of the night, and every creak of cooling timber became the hand of Thaddeus trying the door, and testing the window frames. He *would* find us. He knew Beatrice from this part of Westmoreland, from this cluster of deep valleys, this lonely corner of England. He would ask around, and he would come.

I did not want to be alone. I wanted to feel Beatrice next to me, another flesh and blood being to soothe the terrors of the night. But as the time passed I gave up hoping she would come and slowly felt the dream world seeping into my head, seeking me out and placing me in its maddening allegory.

She was naked, as I had seen her in the bath that afternoon, pale and delicate, like a china figurine, a thing to be admired for its craftsmanship, its ethereal smoothness, its lustre,... but also something to be handled with infinite care, with respect for its fragility. So it was all the more horrifying to see that she wore an iron band around her neck about which was fastened a long chain, also that she grovelled on her hands and knees amid the mud and dung of the fellside. The other end of the chain was held in the fist of a rotund, ape of a man - the fist of Thaddeus. Ape man. Lizard man. Animal man.

"You cannot have her," I was saying. "You must let her go."

But the ape-man, my brother, began to grunt and snort like a bull. Mucus sprayed from his nostrils and glistened in beads upon the hairs of his chest,... and he yanked the chain so Beatrice cried out, her eyes bulging as she was choked. He was dragging her up Drummaur Fell, towards the tarn and there I knew he meant to drown her. But Beatrice could not be drowned, I thought. One's soul-image could be chained, held captive, made sick, even turned against me and pressed into Shadow's service. But she could not be killed!

"You know this is ridiculous," I went on, trying to reason with the man, trying

to remain calm even though the sight of her skin, soiled with filth, made me dizzy with panic, and I was also blind with anger at my own impotence. The way she looked at me - eyes wide, staring, pleading, imploring me to release her - it was like a long, slow, electrocution!

"You will not claim her as your own," he sneered. "You've had your chance. So now I shall have her back."

"You cannot."

"Then claim her,... lust for her. Leave your seed in her, like any normal man."

Was that to be it then - the basis of his vulgar argument? There were many palm sized stones exposed by the erosion of the fellside, so I picked one up and spun it at him, rather like one spins a pebble in order to make it skip over water. The feel of it as I gave it one last flick of spin with my finger was very satisfying and though I did not deliberately aim it with my eye, I did so with my mind and knew the aim was true. It struck him on the temple and he fell down dead.

Dreams never speak to us directly,... never resort to the use of language, or dialogue that is easily remembered. The effectiveness of dreams lies more in their capacity to pull us up and make us think. Thaddeus had been goading me, presenting to me the paradox of my thoughts concerning this incarnation of Beatrice: the physically perfect but emotionally immature woman, the child-woman,... the woman it would have perhaps been improper for me to desire. That he goaded me into desiring her, might have confirmed that such a thing was not the correct course, except I was left with the eerie feeling that I wanted more than anything to be with her,... to have her think of me as hers, and to have her look upon me as the one man in the world who was worth anything to her. Such thoughts were a danger to us both, they were thoughts that disturbed the delicate balance between us, for only when two people are balanced do they approach each other in a manner that is correct. Imbalance leads to mistakes. To catastrophe!

I passed the remainder of that night in a strange embrace, the weight of Beatrice on top of me, but I was prevented from holding her, from embracing her, my arms pinned to my sides by the tightness of the bedclothes. Such was the fact of the dream, and also it turned out to be the reality, for it was in the small hours that Beatrice had awoken, disturbed by her own nightmares of Thaddeus, and had come to my room, there to lie upon me, her body diagonally slumped, her head upon my pillow, her voluminous hair fanned out across my face, so that as I slept, I breathed its scent, and thus we remained until the latter part of the following morning.

I came around to the mature sun pressing against the curtains and knew it was already late. I came around slowly to the fact of her presence, her weight, her slow breaths, and to the knowledge that I loved her in a way I had yet to understand, but also in a way that inextricably bound us to this place, bound us also unto death. I checked the corners of my soul and realised I still wanted

no other man to possess her like this, as I did. This was the after taste of the dream, the abiding emotion, and it was crucial to an understanding of things that I trusted would come to me later, when I was not so intent on searching for them.

"Will he come today, do you think?" she murmured. She had already been awake for some time, watching, waiting for me to break the surface of my consciousness.

"He doesn't know where we live," I reminded her. "We had a shock yesterday, but our fears will pass. His shadow will pass."

She shook her head. "You know he will come, Joshua."

My arm ached miserably and the elbow was bruised so that it could not be moved without discomfort. If he came, I hoped it would not be soon. "Did you dream of him?" I asked. She nodded, but did not share the details with me. She propped herself up one hand and laid back against the bedpost.

"Been lying here since five," she said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Been listening to the tick of your watch on the stand. Listening to the strike of the clock downstairs every quarter, listening to you breathe. Listening to the house."

"And is this still a safe house for you?"

"I feel trapped, Joshua. Feel myself locked in! I can't live here and lock the door. The safest houses don't have locks."

"Can you tell me why you can't think about leaving here? This place I spoke about - there are no locks there. And he would never find you. You would find yourself there. Learn to be comfortable with yourself again."

"You're very kind, Joshua, and I know you mean well, but I can't live anywhere except here. If I leave I get a sickness in my head. I've been a long time in hospital - where they drugged me to keep me calm. Here I can be calm without drugs but only because I'm not myself - because here I can be Beatrice, okay? But Beatrice cannot live outside this place,... she melts, and then I am myself again. And I might as well be dead, Joshua, if I cannot be Beatrice."

"I understand."

"How can you? Doctors didn't understand, so why should you?"

"Some doctors would understand. Some wouldn't. Those who think a brain is like my ticking watch - they wouldn't understand for sure. Some doctors think differently, but neither kind of doctor can fix you up,.. only you can do that. Beatrice, what happened to you tipped you into a place called the unconscious. Like learning to swim, there are two ways - one you get pushed in and either you drown or you learn to get by with whatever strokes come naturally. That's you. Or two, you start out paddling around the edges, testing your depth,... trying a few strokes that someone's explained to you

beforehand, but always with your feet testing for the bottom. That's me."

"You call this swimming, Joshua? Feels more like drowning to me."

"No. You're in the deep end, but keeping your head up. Me? I'm still too scared to leave the shallows."

"You're talking funny again, Joshua!"

"How long have you been here, living alone as Beatrice?"

"Since last winter."

"If you've managed all that time alone, then I'd say you were getting by, so yes, this is swimming. Beatrice, don't answer me if you don't want to, but how did you come to this house?"

"House was empty, Joshua. It was cold, like me. I came over the fells at night, no clothes and drowning - no pills for days because they made me sick, made me so's I couldn't sleep, you see? But then I was going off my head - all crazy panic, and despair like I wanted to lay down and die. So I came in, and lit the fire, washed the filth off my skin.

"Then the house came alive around me. I felt warm and calm,... I knew there were clothes here,... nice clothes, like the pictures of my great grandmother, like in the history books at school. So I got dressed. The house was empty, wasted. No one ever came while I was here, until you that time."

"Can you tell me how you knew me?"

"I didn't at first. Only wondered. Then, the second time, at the tarn, when I spoke your name, I knew by the way you looked at me that it was really you. That you existed."

"And how did you come to know the story of Beatrice and Joshua?"

She hesitated for a long time. This meant going outside of the game, so she tested the ground first and found it firm enough. "She was a kind person who lived here, Joshua. She was my friend. People said things about her that weren't nice, the same sort of things they've always said about me. But that's because they didn't understand. Why is everyone who looks a bit different, or acts a bit different always hated?"

"Not hated, Beatrice. Feared. But go on,.."

"I would come to see her,... and I'd dress up for her because that's the game she always played and it pleased her to see me dress like her, and wear her trinkets - I was company for her, you see? Outside the game I've never been more than an infant to other people on account of me being so stupid, but when I dressed up for her, I became like her, and saw I was a real woman too,... just like her.

"I'd sleep here when I could, sometimes in her bed - but not touching,.. I mean not like that! More sisters, we were. Sometimes at night, she'd talk about

Joshua, like she was lonely for him, but it seemed to me like she needed that loneliness to make the game real for her. That's what people couldn't see,... that it was a game, like they'd forgotten how real games could be when they were children. Then, when I saw that look in your eye at the tarn, Joshua, I knew you'd played this game too."

"And when she died?"

"I was in the hospital. It was after what Thaddeus did to me. I didn't know she'd gone - not for a long time. When I came here that night, I just found the house empty and I thought she was away, that she'd come back soon, and we'd be friends again."

"And when she didn't, then, gradually, you became her?"

"Not her,... I don't know who she was outside the game, Joshua. Don't know her real name. But I began to play Beatrice. Have you never done that? Never wanted with all your heart to play the part in a pretending game that someone else was playing? Never wanted to feel what it was like to be them?"

"Yes,... yes I have."

"Beatrice is a good part to play, Joshua. Beatrice is the best part, and I don't ever want to wake up to myself again." She looked aside, as if suddenly reminded of something. "I know it can't go on for ever, my love. I know this is your house, that papers and documents and things I don't understand make me a stranger here. I just thought if I cooked and cleaned for you, you might let me stay and play Beatrice for a while longer."

Coming on after the dream this way, our talk that morning began to drive my thoughts in directions I had not expected. "Don't worry about that, Beatrice. I'm grateful for your company. The game is important in a way I don't understand, and I came back for the sole reason of playing it with you, but whatever happens I want you to know I won't let any harm come to you, in or out of the game. And I will be Joshua for as long as Beatrice needs him. Also, this house is your home, as well as mine, for however long you need it."

Have you ever seen a woman glow? Have you ever felt it? I felt it then. Something lit up her face - a rich glow that spread even to the tips of her fingers and her hair so that she seemed surrounded by a halo of light. Then, without moving a muscle, she reached out and embraced my soul. I saw that I had touched her, and I wanted to weep.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and rose proudly, like a queen, like a deity possessed of a power that was not to be underestimated. And it was as if the energy fast filling this place to the brim had found yet one more fissure to enter on its way to bursting clean through.

"Shall we have eggs for breakfast, Joshua?"

"Yes,... yes. An egg would be nice, my love."

## Chapter 39

## The wheel of Keramos

Meditation is a business that is much exaggerated. Indeed a great deal of expensive instruction, can yield a method that is quite useless, one that consists basically of a lot of huffing and puffing, coupled with a posture that is impossible to hold comfortably for the length of time that is required. And then there is always the obligatory array of consumer props and perfumes, so distracting as to render void all other efforts, no matter how well intentioned.

Meditation is really just sitting quietly for a while. My father of an evening would gaze into the coals, quite lost amid the ebb and flow of his thoughts, and in so doing followed a technique of meditation as old as mankind for all his adult life, but would never have claimed any knowledge of the art at all. Thus by not doing, my father succeeded in doing more than others who sit with ferocious intent, and thereby miss the point entirely.

Of course there are techniques of visualisation that, for reasons not well understood, bring about peculiar changes in consciousness and physiology. Tree gazing is a method I find personally effective, but so unexpectedly potent had its effects been the last time, I was afraid to try it just now. Instead I found myself beneath the willow in the garden, my back against its trunk, just sitting, eyes closed, resting my thoughts upon the gentle ins and outs of my breath.

According to Khan, when the breath is audible, the flow of the mind is coarse, but in following and softening the breath, until its sound is more imagined than heard, one enters a silken silence, and thereby one picks up the effortless flow of things.

Events cannot be directed. The sooner you realise that, the sooner your life will pick up the current and begin to move of its own accord. So in meditation, there is no prayer, no kernel of a query to be cracked under the intensity of one's inner eye,... there is simply disengagement and a detached observation of the swim of one's thoughts. By such detachment we invite stillness. And through such stillness we sometimes catch a glimpse of things beyond the curtain of consciousness: things the sages might call insights, or what the modern, rational man might call delusion.

My own delusion had been sitting on the lawn for a while. She was by now a familiar spirit, entirely the product of imagination, but possessing the vividness and the authenticity of a drug induced hallucination. It was Beatrice of course, or at least the inner part of myself who assumed her guise from time to time. She had not looked up at me yet, but was quietly reading a cloth-bound book of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, Keramos - dated 1878 and formerly the property of the Hotel Royal, Sorrento. It was a volume I had

discovered in O'Doire's bookshop where, by some circuitous route, it had ended up in rather sad condition. This was years ago and it puzzled me why it should suddenly be significant to me now.

*Turn turn my wheel, Turn round and round,*

*Without a pause, without a sound:*

*So spins the flying world away!*

*This clay well mixed with marl and sand,*

*Follows the motion of my hand;*

*For some must follow and some command,*

*Though all are made of clay.*

I was not familiar with the work of Longfellow, but had been attracted by his rhythms and also the mystery of Keramos. I was not aware of having remembered these lines, but Beatrice conjured them out of my unconscious, so I supposed they must have been there all the time.

*"He is the greatest artist then,"* she went on. *"Whether of pencil or of pen, who follows Nature,..."*

In the poem a potter spins his wares, a master of his art, churning out the stuff of the universe, the potter's hand becoming the hand of fate, the creator, the destroyer,... the all embracing Tao.

"So many puzzles for you, Matthew," she said. "So much that is incomprehensible."

"It troubles me less, I think."

"I think so too, my dear."

"I am clay in the potter's hand, I am given form, then broken down into dust. His wheel is spinning - I understand that - but as yet I see no shape, Beatrice."

"Nor does the potter. What comes by following nature comes most easily into form and is generally without deliberate intent. The finest in creation does not come by sitting first and thinking what then shall I create? We must always let the form flow of its own accord."

"I can see that's true, but sometimes it flows in directions I find threatening."

"Such is the potter's way, Joshua."

"Can you counsel me with regard to Thaddeus? What am I to do?"

"You already know the answer."

"Even though he threatens the life of an innocent woman? Am I really to stand by? Is that the potter's wish?"

"It is always right to preserve life -that is God's way - but never at the cost of deliberate killing. What fear you in this, my love?"

"Our weakness. For sure he will kill us both, and the only way to counter his strength is to think of annihilation, to think of weapons, of subterfuge."

"Ah,.... but you know this is incorrect."

"Yes."

"Listen, do not lock your door tonight. Do not lock out these fears - invite them in and they shall be resolved in the way that nature intends. Be assured Nature shall not let him take either of you pointlessly."

"I thought I'd dealt with him once. I thought I knew all my dark corners."

"And that knowledge has brought you this far. The prize is great my love, but also the challenge. Remember, our journey is not a straight line, it is a spiral, moving ever closer to the centre. The potter's wares take shape not by linear motion, but always by the turn of his wheel."

She held up her palm for me as she had done before, fingers splayed, but the mark of the Ourobourous, the tail eating serpent had gone, shifted into a medieval drawing of a pair of entwined lovers. "She is flesh, and has all the nature of flesh. She will want to touch you, when she's ready. Do not be afraid to allow it."

She closed her palm and the sun filled my vision with golden rods. "And remember, my love. Tomorrow is the tenth day."

When my vision cleared, Beatrice was approaching with a tea tray, white china glinting, and fresh scones upon a silver platter which she set upon the table. As ever, there was something regal in her steps as her hem swept the lush green lawn, and there was a pride in the tilt of her chin.

"The tenth day?"

"What's that my love?"

"I don't know - something I was thinking about. The tenth day?"

"Try these scones while they're still warm."

"Is there a line in Keramos about the tenth day? Is there a copy in my room I could read and check? Tomorrow is the tenth day."

"Joshua, talk sense to me. Tomorrow is when Charlotte comes, that's all I know."

"Charlotte!" Of course! She would come to me in ten days, she'd said. But can it be ten days already?

"Is Keramos a book?" asked Beatrice.

"It's a poem. Rather a long poem," I replied.

"I like poems," she said as she sliced a scone in half. The blade looked bigger and sharper than was necessary and I was afraid she would slip and cut her palm, but the scone opened gently and uneventfully into two. She spread butter upon them with a movement of her wrists that can only be described as loving, then offered me half. "But only when they rhyme," she added. "I suppose that's because I'm stupid. I bet you like those poems that start their lines with small letters and don't rhyme at all so's you wonder what point there is in them?"

"I like poems that rhyme too. I don't think it means you're stupid. You're not stupid. Really, you make too much of it, you know? I wish I could teach you to value your self as much as I value your self."

"Is my self inside of me?"

"Yes, and it's a rare jewel of a self."

"Its a scared self, Joshua. Scared of dying, scared of being swallowed up by madness. That's why I hate it. Because my self is a coward. Always so scared!"

"Are you more scared now? I mean since we began playing this game together?"

"Less maybe,... always less scared when you're not alone, Joshua."

"That's a start then."

"Read some poetry to me tonight? By the fireside?"

"All right. There must be a book of poems somewhere in the house. I'll look for one shall I? And Beatrice,... listen. You were right about the door. We should leave it unlocked, or life is not worth the living here. What you said about the safest houses not needing locks,... that was very wise. No sense in making a prison for ourselves. We'll face things as we come to them, eh? This old house invited us together for a reason, and I'm sure it was not just to have us both murdered in our beds. This house is our friend, I think!"

The rhythms of Longfellow's Keramos ran through my head all afternoon, like a heartbeat, line after line of it surfacing unbidden from my unconscious. I searched the bookshelves, thinking I was bound to come across a synchronistic copy of it, but all I managed to turn up was Palgrave's Golden Treasury, a third edition, dated 1893. That in itself was curious since this edition limited the range of verses I could read to the nineteenth century. Later editions of Palgrave would have strayed far beyond the Edwardian period and therefore been inauthentic.

But the evening at Cragside was not concluded by the pair of us sitting cosily, either side of the grate, with me reading verses out loud to her. Admittedly, that was our intent and it was how we began, when the sun slipped behind Drummaur fell and the shadows swallowed the valley, but as I watched her

light the lamp and poke the coals, she gave me a sideways glance that spoke of something stirring in her breast: a question she was afraid to ask, and suddenly the mood of the night was changed so that my voice now sounded flat and irrelevant as I read to her.

"Cold tonight, Joshua! See how the fire burns!"

I set the book aside and studied her: "Yes, a hint of frost, perhaps. Autumn coming."

"Please, go on. I like the way you read."

"I will, if it's what you want,... but there's no need to be polite, you know."

"The verses are a bit twiddly,... some of them. And I keep wandering off in my head."

"Twiddly? Yes,.. yes they are aren't they. Let's read something else shall we? A story perhaps?"

"No. Talk to me. Tell me about magic: about your magic. Your magic yesterday with the lavender was very powerful. It cleaned my head and stopped the poison getting into my heart."

"It's not really magic, you know. It's just a way of thinking about things, that's all."

"You saw me yesterday. Saw under my clothes. That was a powerful magic too. Letting gentle eyes see my skin. Felt like pulling poison arrows out of it, one by one. Made me feel soft and gentle, Joshua, because of that."

I picked up the book again, embarrassed at being reminded of seeing her in the bath, and I began to turn it in my hands, nervously. Turn,... turn,.. Had this woman been a potter, her wares would have been very fine indeed.

"I need gentle eyes, Joshua," she went on. "Eyes like yours. Need a gentle man to be near. Want to look at a gentle man. I think I want to see a gentle man,... under his clothes."

"Ah,..." The prescience of the earlier vision took my breath away. I was being prepared, the seeds of this moment sowed. I demurred. "Is that wise, do you think?"

"Wise? I don't know about wise, Joshua. I only know I've got a problem with men. I've only ever seen the skins of those who were cruel or used me up, and the last was very cruel indeed, so I fear all men's skins are cruel. I know they're not, but think and fear aren't the same, are they? You must have been skin to skin with many women, I mean a man your age, so it would only be a little thing for you. Won't you do it for me then? Let me see you undressed,... just for a moment."

In the practices, one looked for essence,... the essence that was female, the thing that lay under the person: the memories, the conditioning of the vessel's experience. Since my earliest initiation, I had learned to regard all women in

that way and it had helped my relations with them, but Beatrice - I was afraid to look at Beatrice as a woman. And in truth I realised it was because the essence in her burned more brightly than in other women - even Ghita, or perhaps especially Ghita, for Ghita's personhood shone bright as the sun. Then I remembered my earlier thoughts, that what underlay Beatrice was purest Yin, a velvet darkness, and priceless,... for its innocence.

"You want me to undress for you?"

She nodded.

"My skin is not very handsome, Beatrice."

"Handsome can be cruel too, Joshua. Just want to see gentle. Just want to see your gentle skin. No matter what it's shape. "

So as the last of the light slid out of the sky, and the fire lit up the room, I stood upon the rug and slowly bared my skin. Meanwhile she sat and watched, quite still, but with a movement in her eyes that betrayed the thunder in her breast. It was when I came to unbuttoning my trousers that I noticed the knife she'd secreted up her sleeve. She drew it out now, and I paused.

"It's only so's I know you won't come near," she said.

"Believe me, I won't come near, Beatrice. I won't move. Look, perhaps we've gone too far in this. This is a delicate business and we should take our time with it. I'll get dressed again, shall I?"

"No, but be slow. And you mustn't come near."

The last male sex she'd seen had damaged her beyond all proper repair, so it was an understated gesture, when I stood before her, and all she did was cover her mouth with one hand, while she ominously thumbed the blade of the knife she held in the other.

I believe I was more afraid of her at that moment than I would ever be of Thaddeus. But also I was forgetting how significant a moment this was for her.

She gazed at me for a long time, then made to get up, but I stepped back, swallowing hard, my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth. "The knife," I said. "You must leave the knife there. Trust me, Beatrice, you do not need it. You can come nearer to me if you want, but not with the knife. I know you wouldn't mean to hurt me,.... but accidents do happen,...."

She shook her head as if to dislodge something, then remembered the knife and tossed it aside. Slowly she came and stood upon the rug before me, the pair of us bathed in the warmth and the glow of the fire. I happened to glance down and glimpsed for a moment the pattern on the rug. It was circular with a rope-work design running around its circumference, and in the firelight the design resembled the scales of the Ourobourous,... the pair of us standing in its centre.

What strange alchemy was this?

Leaving one hand over her mouth, she touched the other to my forehead and ran it slowly down, over my face, my chest, my stomach, then slid her splayed fingers through my hair, to seal them, chill and firm, around the knot of my sex - a knot that seemed to shrink back inside of me even as the chill of her palm grew warm and she removed her free hand to join the first.

She was puzzled. "Can it not swell, Joshua?"

"What? Oh,... sometimes not," I said, failing to add that such a thing was hardly unusual when the rest of me was rigid with fear.

She wrapped her arms around my neck then and hung there for what seemed an age. She was lost to the moment, and I could think of nothing else but to rock her gently.

"Is it because Joshua prefers Charlotte to touch him there?"

"Beatrice,... we're running along too fast,..." It was true, the myth was outpacing me.

"It's just a game,... remember?" she soothed "Just words. No harm can come."

"If I were controlling this game, there would be no Charlotte, and Joshua would not have betrayed Beatrice. The man I am, outside this game, he hates Joshua for what he does to you. The man I am outside this game would do anything to protect you and look after you. It's true, I hate Joshua!"

"No,... you mustn't. I know Joshua likes his Charlotte, but likes her different to Beatrice. Beatrice likes Charlotte too, I think,... but Charlotte likes to live alone, and Joshua will never desert his Beatrice. Joshua will always come home to me, won't he? Joshua and Beatrice will live here for ever in this house. This house is our friend. That's what you said, and it sounds so right. This house is our friend. Yours and mine."

I tried to bring her back into the focus of the ring: "This is a magic rite, remember? You look upon a gentle skin, in order that you're not afraid, in order that you clear your head of Thaddeus's poison."

"And its clears, it clears," she crooned. "But now I want to see how gentle swells, how gentle swells for me as well as for Charlotte. I want to know a swell that's kindly meant, bringing sweetness and not hate."

She knelt then and grasped me tightly round the waist, planted my sex into the warm earth of her bosom, and like a flowering bud I felt myself grow achingly rigid into the soft light of her curious gaze.

Surely, the touch of a sincere lover is a sacred act! And that evening Beatrice reclaimed a part of Joshua to herself, not for herself but for another purpose - one I could not easily guess. It was important for her to feel the Yang hardness growing out of the fertile valley of her bosom, but as time passed she grew less sure about the physical reality of our embrace. The dream faded and

she broke away, turning her back while her eyes swivelled sideways trying to catch a hint of what I felt. The beauty of the moment was lost.

"Are you angry with me, now," she said.

"Angry? No."

"Hate?"

"Hate? How could I ever hate you?"

"Hate myself then. I've made you ache, made you swell, and now I turn away and say I still don't want a touching game. I'm nothing but a witch, Joshua! And people are right to say the things they do about me. Don't feel for me. I'm a bad person and I'll destroy you. I don't want to, but I will because its my nature."

"Beatrice, listen. There is a rule about life, and it is this: whatever else we feel: be it sad or confused or lonely or even angry at times, we should never hate ourselves, or we shall never come to truly know ourselves. You should value the jewel inside of you. It's so rare, and so very precious."

"Hush! Don't want to know myself!"

I dressed while she held her back to me and then, making sure she was a good distance from the knife, I approached and laid a hand upon her shoulder. She gave a frightened twitch but remained still, not wanting to break contact, though I could feel her quivering like a frightened rabbit.

"Beatrice. We should be together, tonight. We should share a pillow. Come to me and let me know that you are there before I sleep, this time."

"Don't you try to have sex with me, Joshua! I mean it!"

"I will not touch you - but you may touch me if you wish to,.. maybe not tonight, but sometime, anytime you feel the want or the need. You say you still don't want a touching game, but really it's too late for that. This is a touching game now, but touching doesn't mean we have to have sex - I mean, make love. There are many ways of touching."

She thought for a while, then sighed and the quivering lessened. "I suppose it's true. I've made it a touching game haven't I? No going back now. And I believe you Joshua, you won't do anything to me, and even if I asked you'd be scared to, on account of the knife. But if I did it to you,... made love to you, you'd let me,... wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Not that I will, because I won't, Joshua. Understand!"

"I understand."

"I'll come then. You know, my love, you're a very strange man."

"Yes,... I've been told that before."

"But thank you,... for letting me touch you. It was a powerful magic. I don't quite know what it's done,... but it's done something."

That night she came wearing a long night-gown of ivory, glowing soft, as she pulled back the covers of my bed. This was different than before,... no clandestine creeping in the middle of the night, drawing me from dreams. No talk of sleepwalking. This was open and complete,... sliding into bed and gazing up now from the pillow beside me, like a wife, like a lover of long standing.

"Is the door unlocked?" I asked.

She nodded. "Let him come. Let him kill me. I don't think I shall care after this."

"He won't come tonight."

When I put out the light, I felt her slide closer at once. "Warm me," she said. "Make me feel warmer inside."

I held her, as one holds and comforts a frightened child, and that was enough for a while, but eventually, I felt her hand moving down, felt it slowly raise the hem of my night-shirt, while she buried her face in my arm in sudden desperation in case I resisted. "I just want to hold," she said. "Just let me hold, Joshua. Please."

She sealed her fist around an already alert sex, and there, in a state of breathless expectation, I lay, not moving, while she settled back upon her pillow and drifted into sleep. She was as good as her word, and had indeed only wanted to touch.

Now, it's an irksome thing, the male ejaculation, especially if carried out in the open, so to speak, like wetting the bed, and must subsequently be dealt with of course, or sleep is impossible. I hung on a while, in her grip, one part of me aching for the motion that would bring about such a climax, the other daring not to move in case I came and it disturbed her.

There was something overpowering in all of this. Not long ago, I had displayed with almost childish satisfaction my ability to control this recalcitrant organ,... but then the energy controlling it had been easily overcome, sipped like watery wine into my head. This however, was a most powerful spirit, and resisted all attempts to check its hold over me.

I thought of Ghita, and of the time, reclining upon her cushions when she had held me in the same manner as this, so close to the point of no return, even the pulse-beat of her wrist seemed sufficient to inch me closer.

"With eyes closed," she'd said, "seek the light inside yourself and draw the climax back into yourself, instead of merely wetting my hand."

"I can't. I want to move, but I'd be ashamed to wet your hand."

With her free hand then she pressed two fingers beneath my sex, between my

legs, most intimately, teaching me the location of the body on which to fix my mind, teaching me the feel of the pressure, first physical and then mental that could reverse the flow. And though I would never have believed it possible with no more than my imagination to provide the motion, my seed flooded backwards, forcing me out into a searing light and I felt myself transported, felt myself floating.

I reacted just in time, lifting a heel to press upon the spot, then felt myself lifted bodily upon the wave of a monstrous climax brought about by no more than the touch of a motionless hand.

## Chapter 40

## The second dream

I came into the dream on a rowing boat, gliding easily along a section of the river Ribble, near the little town of Ribchester, where once there had stood a fine Roman fortress. But the dream architect had provided instead a castle from Medieval Europe, possibly France, and so the river also became the Loire, a scene stolen from memories of a holiday long ago.

I was wearing a suit, very stiff and formal, and I felt myself to be important, a man groomed to present himself at his best, attending a very important meeting. I drew up at some steps that ran down to the river and there I left the boat to climb a short way through the castle gate. Here I entered an enclosed parkland. The scale of it was not in proportion to the bounding walls of the castle, which now seemed to enclose an unimaginably vast territory of rounded hills and lush forest.

To the left was a tower, which I ascended by a spiral stair and at the top of the tower was a room which looked out over the land. I could see now that the land encompassed the whole of the world that was known to me,... the Westmoreland hills, the streets of Manchester and all the familiar landmarks inbetween: O'Doire's bookshop, The Retreat, Ghita's home, the tower-block where I'd once worked as a programmer, the domain of the Lizard-man whose identity was now interchangeable with that of Thaddeus. And of course, there was Cragside.

Beatrice was sitting on an upright chair, her hands folded in her lap, looking at me. She was wearing a dress of ivory silk, intricately laced, and the look she gave me was piercing, but also it was a look that flooded me through with a sense of her love and her compassion. Whatever happened in my life, this woman would always be with me, and when I died, she would be the one who opened my eyes with kisses and, taking my hand, raise me up again. She would be the one I stood with as I entered the unknown.

"Well," she said, with an approving look. "That was quite something, don't you think?"

"I feel like I've been electrocuted!"

"There was no other way. You are more skilful with your body than you give yourself credit for."

"I had a good teacher."

"Hm,... I see you still revere Ghita."

"Yes,... but I'm no longer in love with her."

"That would appear to be true,.... or I suppose you would not be standing

before me now. Do you know who I am?"

"I've always known it,... but what do I call you? You appear to me as Beatrice,... but I'm sure you have no name, really,... that you are more a feeling than a label."

"Then know me by my feel, and call me by whatever name you wish."

"We've never met before in such a way as this. Is this to be a long encounter? I would dearly like to spend a long time with you if I may."

"Are you not afraid?"

"I am not afraid of you, though I know if I'm disrespectful, you could be dangerous to me. You could even bring my life to an end if you feel I'm hopelessly misguided."

"Our life, Matthew. Our life in flesh."

"Yes,... our life. You are my queen and I honour you."

"And for coming this far, I honour you," she said. "And I recognise you as my king. Thaddeus cannot chain me or keep me from you. It may be that one day soon we shall be married. Do you understand the meaning of this?

"Conjunction? Conjoining? I have felt your skin. I have worn it, as you wear mine, but I don't know what the outcome will be. I know only not to prejudge it, or anticipate its structure. Anticipation will limit its potential. By naming it I will destroy it."

She gave me a sideways glance: "Yes,..." she said, then held out her hand. "You will destroy it. So take care, my love. But for now, come and walk with me."

So we walked slowly, arm in arm, and she was the Beatrice of old, the Beatrice of Amanda Fleetwood's making, and I did not mind it. We took a path that led us at once into the hills.

"In the manifest world," I said. "There are certain forms, certain energies directing my path."

"Yes. You sense this, and you are correct."

"But Beatrice, please tell me, are you their creation? Do you do their bidding? Or do they do yours?"

"These energies are immanent, my love. We are both influenced by them as they come into being. Your sense of this comes from listening to me, but in recognising their purpose, and moving with it, we might also recognise more clearly our own."

"But what do they want?"

"Speculation is not helpful, Matthew. And anyway, I really do not know or I would have guided the solution towards you in your dreams."

"But how can we help?"

"By remaining unstructured, by seeing the purpose of things only in retrospect. Only then will we recognise the path we've trodden as being correct, but if we try to prejudge, then we shall lose the way, as well as each other. There was a time when you did not know me. There was a time when you heard me calling and you would see me in the beauty of other women. Now we have found each other. See, how we walk together, see how we hold hands?"

"But who am I to you. Am I Joshua or Matthew?"

"That's not so easy a question as you might suppose, my love. Forget your name, forget mine also. Think of woman, and that's who I am. Think of man, and you are he."

"I can't lose you now. It would kill me."

"You cannot lose me, Matthew."

"But if I should let go?"

"Then stop at once, and look for me. I will not be very far away. I shall guide you back to me, but remember, the longer we are parted, the harder it will be for you to read the omens."

When I looked at her again I saw I held the hand of a smaller, slimmer woman, so delicate and fine, her features drawn with the consummate perfection of a china doll. "I do not know this form, Beatrice. I have not seen it before. You look so gentle, so perfect,..."

"We have both worn a million faces Joshua. But you shall always know me."

A mist came swooping from a sudden cloud, and she was drawn away from me. The mist thickened and I thought that I would lose her but I resisted the urge to call out, and to run wildly about the fell in search of her. Instead, I waited calmly and the mist cleared to reveal her standing some distance away. She motioned with her head and I followed where she led. She held out her hand, and I took it once more.

"Me-thinks the way becometh strange from here my love," she said. "Be you strong enough, you think?"

## Chapter 41

## Charlotte's vision

When I woke it was once more to bright sunshine pressing against the window in the blue room, and to the knowledge it was already late. Beatrice lay quiet, her hand resting loosely upon my sex beneath the covers, while another presence gazed upon us, framed in the doorway.

It was Charlotte.

She was wearing a ruby dress and a straw boater. Strangeness indeed, I thought, little knowing how much stranger things were to become.

"I was invited for lunch," she said. "Remember?" And there was a tone in her voice that betrayed a certain impatience, and not, I suspect, at having been kept waiting.

I was still groggy and conscious of Beatrice's hand. I tried to dislodge it gently, but as she stirred, her grip tightened.

"Is it midday already?" I asked.

"It's one-oclock."

Beatrice opened her eyes and as she grew more lucid, she relaxed her grip. Then she saw Charlotte and froze. I felt then anxiety in the tenseness of her muscles, but gradually she seemed to give in, give way, and she lifted her head, drowsily. "Good afternoon, Charlotte. It seems we've overslept. "

"You should be more careful, leaving your doors unlocked," said Charlotte. "You invite intruders." Her voice, bristly though it was, was not the voice of Ellen McBride. This was Charlotte, a jealous mistress come to find her lover a-bed with his wife, and I was afraid of her.

Beatrice rose, still a little dazed. She recovered the loose strands of her hair and gathered her robe about her. "Intruders are not welcome here," she said. "This house will always repel those who are not welcome."

"You've been with Joshua too long, talking like that."

Beatrice regarded her for a moment. "Cousin Charlotte, we're all three of us in this room very strange, I think. Joshua is our man. And we are his women." She stifled a yawn, then shuffled drowsily out of the room.

"His women?" queried Charlotte, as she passed.

"Yes," said Beatrice. "Wife, and mistress. Lunch is cancelled,... but please join us for breakfast instead."

Charlotte blinked and tapped her head against the door frame, becoming slowly Ellen McBride once more, as I became Matthew, the two of us

momentarily embarrassed, like fancy-dressers caught in the sober light of dawn.

"I have to remind myself this is a game," she whispered. "Yet I really was Charlotte then,... Beatrice knew me as Charlotte. And Beatrice was Beatrice to me." She looked afraid. "Am I invited, Mr Rowan? Am I safe here? I seem to recall it was me who invited myself. This is all too fast, too deep for me."

"I don't think you need to worry. Perhaps I should get dressed."

"Yes,... you should get dressed. It's hard for a mistress to walk in on her lover asleep with his wife. Do you sleep together every night?"

"Most, at least eventually we do,.. but things are not quite what they seem."

"She had her hand on your dick - and seemed to be enjoying it or is that not quite what it seems either?"

"Actually, no. I don't think it is."

"I have warned you about her, Mr. Rowan."

"I know. Look, Ellen, in a way you are in danger here. She is my wife, at least in the game we play, but you have to separate out the part of you that is Charlotte from the part of you that is Ellen. Charlotte might be angry at finding her lover in bed with his wife, but Ellen McBride cannot. Do you understand? Ellen McBride is not in love with Matthew Rowan, not in love with Joshua. Ellen McBride is in search of herself. For now Charlotte is merely the path she is travelling."

Ellen McBride surfaced, and looked uncomfortable for a moment in her high collar. "Well of course. Did you think I really cared? Why should I care? You're just a man like all the rest. A lying bastard of a man."

"Well,... I'm not aware I've ever lied to you,... I mean it,... Beatrice and me, it's not what it seems."

"It's not that. I told you, Ellen McBride really doesn't care. Listen, you told me these changes we bring do not effect the external world, only the way we see it. The world goes on, you said,... only our vision of it changes."

"I seem to recall saying something like that, yes."

"Well okay, but I've had dreams. I,.. travelled,... saw things I could not possibly have seen, but things that have turned out to be true."

"All right, sometimes things can happen, things we can easily dismiss as coincidence, but which we can equally read at face value."

"No, sorry, this was more than that. You did that trick with my necklace, made me understand how easily we can delude ourselves. But it happened. I saw the future in a dream. The imaginary world broke through into reality, changed my reality. Do you understand? And you told me it wouldn't."

"This sort of thing doesn't happen to everyone," I said. "I'm sorry if I misled

you. I didn't want to push you too far, that's all. Did you understand the experience?"

"No,... it frightened me. And now I lie awake at night, afraid to dream."

"All right, look, Ellen, that trick with the necklace, I wanted only to make you cautious of adopting an unreasonable belief in your own powers, because sometimes we do indeed delude ourselves. However, sometimes we do not. Unfortunately, the differences in what we can rely upon and what we can not are impossible to define. We might have an experience of unnerving precognition, but it does not mean we can make our living as a psychic medium. The rules governing these things are entirely mysterious - indeed there are no rules that I know of to describe this world."

"Am I in danger? Am I going mad?"

"Danger lies only with Ego, with the image we have of ourselves. When beginning this path, Ego will have nothing to do with it, but we persist out of a mysterious compulsion, while it circles on the periphery of our awareness like a hungry wolf, waiting to devour us when we stumble, when we encounter something that makes us doubt our willingness to suspend our disbelief,... but then something else happens! Maybe it's a prescient dream, or a vision of something, or we read a mind, or in some other way experience something that is by any rational explanation totally impossible,... an event that is too startling for coincidence,... this blows away our doubts. And ego? What does Ego do then? It becomes inflated."

"Inflated?"

"The power of prescience in the hands of a dominant ego can destroy the personality, Ellen. It can turn us into egomaniacs bursting with our own self worth, a belief in our superiority over lesser mortals. It can inflate us to the level of gods,... but that's not how it works. We are all capable of these experiences,... it's merely a question of being open to them. But equally none of us have any control. I did not lie to you, but it would have been wrong of me to present the possibility in order to lure you down this path. When I met you I thought that for a woman, you were the manliest creature I knew,... you had such a powerful ego, I was afraid it would destroy us both."

"Then I *am* in danger."

"Not immediately. You were afraid of it and fear is good."

"What should do?"

"Nothing,... These glimpses,... they mean us no harm. Look upon them as insights and try to engage with them, ask yourself what it is that was meant. That way they can guide your path, instead of subverting it. Your ego is a brittle shell, a hard layer to hide by far the greater part of you which is sensitive and intuitive, and in you, Ellen, it seems uniquely powerful. Transform your ego,... let it be the thing that encourages you further down your path instead of spinning you off at every corner."

"Can you control the dreams with experience? Do you have dreams?"

"I do see things,... sometimes, particularly of late, but no, we cannot control them. And after we have experienced these things, still we doubt them. Was it just a coincidence perhaps? Do we delude ourselves by encouraging such vivid fantasies? Are we unhinged, listening to the subtle voices in our heads? I don't know, but questions are good. If we can still question the experience, if we can retain some measure of critical reason, then at least a part of us remains rooted in the manifest world."

"Don't you want to know what it was that happened to me?"

"I've a feeling that whatever it was, was for you,... for you to ponder, to try to understand it in relation to your own path. If you told me, there would be a danger I might contaminate it."

"I disagree. But I won't tell you. I shall take you there instead. You and Beatrice. I believe that's what was meant. I'm part of this game too, am I not? Well I think this is the next move. And no, I don't understand it. Nor am I expecting you to understand it either, but you should see it all the same."

## Chapter 42

## The three players walk out

That afternoon Beatrice served a meal of home-made potato soup and bread, in willow-patterned china bowls upon a blue cloth in the dining room. It amazed me that she could do this, conjure something so sophisticated from simple ingredients and from the technical simplicity of Cragside's antiquated kitchen range.

The dining room was not used much. It was home to a large oval table of distressed mahogany, with ostentatious cabinets and dressers to match. It was unusually formal, possessing a yang showiness, not at all in keeping with the general cosiness of the house so I had tended always to avoid it. It did, however, have rather a fine view southwards, beyond the bounding hedgerow, towards the head of Drummaurdale, which I now regarded while quietly praying that this unusual meeting between the three of us would go off without a hitch.

These two women were important to the unfolding of things, important to Matthew, important to Joshua, important also to each other - even though Charlotte's role involved a shameful deceit - the duping of Beatrice's quiet innocence.

Beatrice apologised for the plainness of the meal but Charlotte politely dismissed her concerns. For one so damaged by life, I was deeply impressed that Beatrice could be icy calm at moments that would have thrown others into a panic.

"The soup is very good," said Charlotte. "And this is a lovely house,... so cosy, so welcoming. So much nicer than Fernlea."

"Thank you, Charlotte."

Through her simple ministrations, I noted Beatrice had a skill for the nurturing of life, and she would have made an excellent mother to the child she was so obviously not carrying. Such things of course had lost all value in society, and that I could observe them now in Beatrice was a source of great comfort amid the alien uncertainty of those first transformational months at Cragside. It was indeed like being pushed back in time to my childhood, and to the home of my mother where my every need, my every whim was taken care of and all I had to do was play my imagining games. But I had to take care not to allow Beatrice to become my mother, I thought.

"Charlotte has invited us to walk with her this afternoon," I said.

Beatrice paused at that, apparently contemplating the soup on her spoon as it was held halfway between bowl and mouth. On the surface she remained calm but the minute dartings of her eyes betrayed the sudden disquiet this news

caused her. She looked at Charlotte, then smiled graciously,... if not quite genuinely.

"A walk will be nice. Thank you Charlotte."

The afternoon was warm, the light sepia soft. The sky was hazy with a uniform layer of thin, amber tinted cloud that denied all expression of shadow or direction. The high land was hidden by it, the cloud being caught by the russet fell-sides, and there at the interface between real and imagined, the mist was gathered into dancing wreaths that drifted slowly towards the valley bottom. Conditions were unusual, I thought, but they did not seem especially portentous.

As I walked, I thought back upon the meal, and how I had looked to Charlotte for any trace of Ellen there might have remained, but she had stuck steadfastly to her character, smiling, warm and sweetly deferential. Even in the moments we were alone, when Beatrice removed the china to the kitchen, it was Charlotte, my secret lover, who kept me company, her eyes flirting and twinkling dangerously at her Joshua in a way that would have been nauseating to the scowling harpy I had first known Ellen McBride to be.

We climbed slowly out of Drummaurdale towards the hause with Greendale, Charlotte's home valley, and from there by the great cairn where I had experienced the unsettling vision of Beatrice, we continued along a trackless ridge, keeping to the high land towards the south. For all the rain in recent weeks, the way was curiously dry, though both women hitched up their skirts a little to protect their sweeping hems from grass-stains, thus revealing for me with each leisurely step a flutter of frilly, creamy cotton.

We did not walk together but moved one before the other, strung out across a hundred metres of fell - Charlotte leading, Beatrice next, then me bringing up the rear. We spoke little, and merely settled into an easy pace as might befit a balmy afternoon, each of us holding our own counsel. I felt an unusual harmony as I walked. There was a profound stillness in their air, and an effortlessness in the way the hill lifted us into his higher reaches. Sometimes such a stillness can be a source of mysterious unease, as if it presages an imminent event, but all I felt was a tremendous sense of peace, mesmerised as I was by the incongruous sight of the two women , dressed so obviously out of time, before me.

On nearby fells there would be Nylon and Lycra and other manufactured synthetics in garish colours, as walkers sweated and gurned their way towards the popular summits, weighed down with all manner of paraphernalia, from their collapsible trekking poles to their global positioning systems. It was a worthy sport enjoyed by men and women, but it was pursued in a manner that was very masculine, very Yang, a manner I had once been all too familiar with. Here though, decades later, on these unfrequented fells, incredibly, there was velvet and tweed: Charlotte's ruby-red, appearing rich and unashamedly sexy now in that peculiar amber light,... and there was Beatrice in a country

beige jacket and skirt. There was a calm femininity in the roll of their hips and in the tilt of their pretty hats as they slipped noiselessly over the fell, and the wind carried back to me a mysterious mingling of their fragrance: Lavender and Rose.

Though Charlotte had not told us, I think I knew where we were going. This was not a case of prescience, more one of making a logical connection from the known illogical facts of my experience thus far. We were heading for the ruined chapel where I had last confronted Ego in the form of Inspector Planer, and where I had first wandered, a long time ago, with another Beatrice.

I had consulted maps and guides during the long years of my exile, and learned that this had been a place of worship until around 1830, when it had finally been abandoned due to a dwindling congregation. Still, one had to admire the hardy constitution of a people willing to traipse from their valleys in their Sunday finery over such a windswept plateau - a good three miles from the nearest farmstead, atop some of the steepest fell-sides anywhere in the county of Westmoreland. And now, for all their efforts, there remained only a ruinous pile of weather-blackened stone.

It was odd, but the ruin seemed a little higher up the valley than when I last remembered visiting it. On that occasion, Beatrice and I had seemed to descent a good way down the southern valley. Clearly my memory was faulty. Up to a decade ago, there had existed a single gable that had defined the ruin as a man made structure, but by the time of my ownership of Cragside even that had fallen, and only the toppled tombstones betrayed the site's religious function - their inscriptions slowly dissolving back into the memory of the cosmos.

Here too had dissolved the last traces, the last words of Amanda Fleetwood, as she had spoken of alternate realities, while explaining to me also the futility of such speculation, and drawing about her ever more the persona of Beatrice - the simple one, the homely one - the Beatrice who walked before me now in fact, a different vessel entirely, but one possessed of the very qualities to which Amanda Fleetwood had aspired. Amanda it seemed had been too tainted by her own world for any hope of surviving the transition. Only her vision had remained pure, and we three, the players, were being drawn ever deeper into its unfolding.

As we came closer, I observed Charlotte's steps beginning to falter, as if she were suddenly reluctant to approach any nearer the scene of her unusual experience. When I caught her up, she unconsciously took my arm, and it was Beatrice who's pace became now more determined. It was she who led the way with a sudden energy, led us to the south of the ruin, then spread a blanket on a fallen tombstone, and sat down. But the energy did not subside in her: I watched as she pulled off her bonnet, and scrunched up her hair, shook it out into a wild mane before pulling open the top of her blouse to expose her long neck and a plunging décolletage. Then she stared out at the land with eyes that seemed to smoulder with contempt.

In the far distance, perhaps two miles away, I caught the lonely silhouette of a whitewashed Lakeland farm, its chimney set against the sky, a copse of Rowan and Alder hiding a scattered outbuildings. Did she know that place?

The sight of her like this unnerved me, because it seemed I was no longer in the company of Beatrice:

"Beatrice?"

She gave a curt nod, as if to confirm her assumed identity, but that was all. Charlotte too had fallen out of character. She broke away from me, roughly severing the linking of our arms, and she began to strut away like a man in drag, her pretty bonnet cast upon the ground as if she was ashamed to be seen in it.

The sky was darkening, the air much cooler and I felt a tingle run down my spine that spoke of fears leaking from my unconscious, fears running to ground and taking root as devils. I was no longer centred, no longer calm, and I realised I had to drop out of character too, become Matthew quickly or drown in something that Joshua was not equipped to deal with. We had become suddenly like actors between takes!

It was Matthew who spoke to Beatrice: "Tell me, what do you feel?"

"Angry," she said. "Something's boiling up inside my chest. It's blinding me and stealing my thoughts. I was happy,... minutes ago,... relaxed and happy after last night, after what happened between Beatrice and Joshua. But now?...."

"What does this place mean to you?"

"Nothing - I've not been here before - at least not as *her* I haven't ,... I mean as Beatrice. Only as, someone else, someone who lives,... lived,... outside of the game. But she's dead now,... gone for ever."

"And that farmhouse over there,... in the distance?"

"No,... Beatrice doesn't know it. It's outside the game, Joshua, Outside the game!" Her eyes had grown black, her expression brooding. "Why did Charlotte bring us here!"

It was true then; she spoke of Beatrice in the third-person. Beatrice had gone. Her eyes were red, her arms trembling as she gripped the sides of the tombstone. I made to comfort her but she shot me a warning look. This was the woman who had cut a man, I thought. She and Matthew were strangers to one another. Beatrice and Joshua had evaporated.

"You must breathe," I said. "Close your eyes and draw breath slowly. Breathe through your heels and then out through the whirlpool your mind has become."

"Heels don't breathe," she said, contemptuously. "Talk sense to me!"

"Heels breathe if you breathe with your eyes closed."

She hugged herself. "It feels like I'm being swallowed up."

"I feel it too. So does Charlotte,... look at her - she's prowling like a spooked lioness. But this is coming from inside of us,... not out there. We can control it, but we mustn't lend it any more of our energy. Do you understand me?"

"I knew we were coming here," she said, then she closed her eyes, and I saw her bosom rising and falling with her first deliberate breaths. "Didn't expect this though. It was never a bad place. Dead can't hurt you, can they? It's the living you've got to watch out for."

With an effort, I summoned up the persona of myself as Ghita's adept, and the devils obligingly withered on the flimsy vine of my ego-consciousness. The darkening sky became torn by a dozen slits of blue and the afternoon began to take on an altogether lighter tone: still portentous, but more benign.

What was this thing, I wondered, this thing that had never lived, but sought expression with such relentlessness?

"The living can be troublesome, can't they," I said. "But see, it's gone now. Your breathing worked."

"Not gone,... changed sure enough but something's coming. Coming fast. Thaddeus maybe, or those lights, or another storm. Something strange. Don't you feel it?"

"There *is* something, but I'm not sure we need to fear it."

Was that where it had happened, I wondered - that little farm? Who lived there now, I wondered? There was no smoke, and though it was impossible to tell from such a distance, I fancied it was empty.

Ellen was still stalking like a madwoman some fifty yards away, and I stared at her until she was pulled up by the feel of my eyes upon her back. She returned my gaze with the startled expression of someone surfacing from a nightmare. Then I gestured for her to come to us, which she did, as if mesmerised.

"How does it feel to you?" I asked her. "Has it passed?"

"You felt something as well? I thought it was just me. It seemed really sinister for a moment,... now it's just strange. But what *was* it?"

"I don't know."

"I feel so ridiculous," she said. "I'm suddenly self conscious in my clothes in case anyone should see me, and I've walked all the way up here without caring a toss."

"Then Charlotte's gone?"

"Like she was someone I made up - which I did of course. But what I suppose I mean is I don't think I can *believe* in her any more. And you?"

"I can't feel Joshua, that's for sure."

"And her?" Ellen tipped her head in the direction of Beatrice.

"Beatrice has gone too."

"Then it's over?"

"I don't know. Tell me,... what did you see here in your dream? Quickly we may not have much time."

She looked aside, then took my arm and led me to a row of headstones. The first marked the passing of one Beatrice Peterson in 1806, the second, Joshua Peterson in 1810, the third Charlotte Culcheith in 1812.

"I saw these names in my dream as clearly as we're seeing them now," she said. "I've seen this ruin before from a distance, so I knew where it was, but I'd never visited it before. After the dream, I came here and looked around. When I found these stones, I felt my flesh creeping, and I ran."

"Beatrice, Joshua and Charlotte! May we rest in peace! Don't fear this place, Charlotte. There's nothing here that can harm us. Your creeping flesh was caused by something inside of you, and it can strike anywhere. So,... the three of us, written down - we did exist! Do exist!"

"It's only our first names that make sense though,... the surnames mean nothing. Maybe I could research them,..."

"That won't be easy. These people predated the law governing registration of births and deaths. You'd have to trawl the parish records,... and still not find out who they were in any meaningful sense, I mean what they did, what they thought and felt. Anyway I don't think that's the important thing,... it's always something simple. It's not these people, we're being shown. The clothes we're wearing,... the period we're creating, its late Victorian,... or maybe early Edwardian. These stones mark a generation that was already ancient then! No, it's something else, a strange persistence. It took form here in these departed souls, two hundred years ago, as maybe it did a hundred years later,..."

"And a hundred years after that? Is that what you're saying? But why can't it find a contemporary trio? There must be a Beatrice and a Joshua and a Charlotte alive somewhere around here. Why does it pick on us, we who have nothing to do with what went on here? Why is it sucking us back in time, making us dress up and talk like characters from a Victorian novel?"

"This is more than dressing up. We become these people. When you become Charlotte, you lose your Scot's accent; it melts into the local dialect; you become a native, we all do."

Charlotte looked over again at Beatrice who seemed to be ignoring us deliberately. "Except her," she said. "She's a native to begin with. She's the only true daughter of these fells. You and I, we're strangers - we don't belong."

"Beatrice is central to the plot, I agree. As for you and I, well, all that matters is what lies within our power, in order bring about an event,... something that

should have happened before, but didn't, or maybe it only partially came about but was stillborn."

"You're making no sense."

"That's because it's your ego that doing the thinking. Look, our view is inevitably limited by the short span of our lives. Some of us might go so far as to accept an irrational belief in a guiding principle, call it God or Tao or fate or whatever, but we always see ourselves at the centre of its purpose, always view things from the perspective of what we might each gain as individuals. But a guiding principle spans eternity,... what flows into being might be generations in the making. It might be centuries or maybe millennia. These people lived their life in close proximity and came together somehow,... that they're buried here as a close group, separate from the other burials implies an intimate relationship. We're looking here at man and wife perhaps, and sister in law. Or maybe brother and sister and cousin. But the reality of these people's lives fixed the boundaries of what was possible between them the moment they were born. Certain things might have happened between them, other things could not."

"Better then three strangers like us with no history, three blank slates, with no restraints beyond imagination,.. three actors who live their roles: I can understand what you're saying, but it suggests to me a certain desperation on the part of fate, Mr Rowan - like its run out of patience and what must come into being must do so within our generation - or bust. That doesn't sound like a guiding principle. Why be in such a rush when you have the whole of eternity at your disposal?"

This was the key insight we required, the insight that had been struggling for realisation through the depths of Ellen McBride's unconscious. "You're right. We should think about that."

A shadow fell across us. It was Beatrice. "We should go," she said. "Anyway, what you were saying: there won't be another generation, will there? We're likely the last humans to ever walk the earth."

Ellen smiled, then replied gently: "You don't believe all that doomsday stuff do you? New Agers have been predicting the end of the world at least once a decade since the 60's."

"World's on fire isn't it?"

"No more than it's always been," said Charlotte. "When these people were alive, the whole of Europe was in flames with Napoleon holding the torch. That same century saw wars in China, in India, South Africa, the Crimea and the United States - the century after that saw the whole world on fire - twice! The world has always been on fire. Only our newspapers and the twenty four hour frenzied media makes us believe things are any worse now than they've ever been."

But something in Beatrice's words had touched a chord in me. "It's easier to

harm ourselves now Charlotte," I said. "You know that! One man with a grudge can kill thousands with a weapon put together in his kitchen, from stuff he buys at a supermarket. For the first time a minority of crazy fools can hold the world to ransom. How was it you put it that time, Beatrice?"

"Don't even need to be bad," she replied. "Just stupid! Now please, we should go from here. I'm getting a really weird feeling."

## Chapter 43

### Through the fabric of reality

In deference to Beatrice's fears we began to make our way back towards the ridge, in the direction we had come. Only moments ago the sky had appeared benign but it now thickened and fell upon us in a dark smudge. Without a broad path to follow, such conditions are completely disorientating. A slight rise in the way can appear like an unfamiliar mountain range looming in the distance, badgering you to change direction. Also, a mountain range many miles away can appear subdued, like a gentle rise in the path - one to be crossed in a dozen strides. The inner compass is lost and the mind is assailed by a fantasy landscape in which nothing holds meaning and where the lay of the land changes with every step. In earlier days, on more dangerous walks in these hills, I had learned the lesson of imagination, that what the mind perceives is not always a measure of the reality underfoot - indeed it was here I had learned that reality and perception are not of the same substance at all.

"We should stop," I said.

Ellen, who was the most confident now, striding ahead in officious police constable mode, cast us an impatient look. "It's this way," she said. "That's Drummaur Fell ahead, we should be heading to our right, dropping down towards the north."

Beatrice shook her head and took my arm, shivering a little, though it was not cold. It felt to me like we should be pressing ahead instead of veering off, but I knew not to rely upon my instincts here. "I'm not sure," I said. "Really, Charlotte, we should stop a moment."

"Joshua's right," said Beatrice. "We should wait; it might clear. Then we can be sure of where we are."

Charlotte was frustrated by our passiveness. "You said we had to get away! Now you want to stop? You should make up your mind!"

"We're too late," said Beatrice. "It's overtaken us. Now we have to wait until it passes."

"But this is settling in for the day," Charlotte protested. "You know what the weather's like up here! Unless you fancy spending the night, I suggest we keep moving."

"Stop!" I said. "Who are you? Who's speaking? Are you Charlotte? Or are you Ellen McBride?"

"Ms. McBride, to you, Mr. Rowan!"

"Ah! I thought so. I recognise the tone. Welcome back Ms. McBride. I wish I could say I'd missed you."

"Both of you stop it!" said Beatrice, suddenly. "I don't know either of you when you talk like that. But since I recognise your features, you must be

Joshua and Charlotte, do you understand? Ellen McBride and Matthew Rowan are outside of the game. Outside of the game, do you see? They have to keep out of this."

She was shouting, becoming visibly distressed.

"She's right, Charlotte. Stop. Listen to the voice inside of you. We have five hours of daylight at the very least. What's the hurry? We must collect ourselves!"

Beatrice took my arm and whispered: "Thank you Joshua!" Then she cast the blanket on the ground and sat, tugging me down with her. "It'll be all right," she said. "Things just feel a little strange, that's all."

"Beatrice, listen: me and Charlotte, well,... we know these hills vaguely, but we weren't brought up here, so we don't have the same sense of direction you must have. You were born here. Can't you feel which way it is to Cragside?"

"I'm not sure. Just sit with me for now, Joshua. We should wait a while. Things will become clear in just a little while."

"You think the mist will lift?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But clarity's more than seeing with the eyes: we should follow omens Joshua."

"There's a time for omens, Beatrice, and there's a time for knowing. I fear this is more a time for knowing. Which way to Cragside?"

I caught myself, then. Had I really just said that? Had I argued for an ego's view of things?

"I can't tell which way for sure," she replied, patiently. "But like you said, got ages before dark. Even then, what's so bad about being up here all night in pitch black? It's not cold. Walked these hills in my skin, Joshua, barefoot too,... you know that! so what's the hurry? Is this not why we've come, to lose ourselves up here?"

Again, it was the innocence of Beatrice that spared us.

"You're right. We're jumping at shadows, afraid of nothing more than fear itself. The fell cannot harm us."

Charlotte came and perched her derriere upon a corner of the blanket. I was fearing the worst in her - a return to the acidic temperament of Ellen McBride, but she seemed to be gathering herself - her other self.

"All right," she breathed. "I'm sorry. There's no hurry at all. We can sit this out." And then, after a moment, as if to change the subject, and the mood: "Have you really walked these hills in your skin, Beatrice?"

Beatrice looked bashful. "Why not? Who's to see?"

"How does that,... feel?"

"What? Feel the air on your skin, Charlotte? See the moonlight turn you white as milk? Feel the air, and the eyes of a bright moon and the stars upon you? How's it feel? You mean you really don't know?"

Charlotte looked away, as if to hide her emotions: "Maybe I'll try it sometime. I suppose it must feel good."

Beatrice smiled, a long, dreamy smile. "I'm not smart like you two. I suppose you've both got some clever ways of enjoying yourself. Joshua - he likes to read poetry and twiddly stories. I like him to read to me of an evening - not because I understand what he's saying, but because the sound of his voice makes me feel nice. Doesn't bother me much when I can't understand something, because there's plenty I don't understand. Not much of a thinking person, am I Joshua? but I know what I feel. I like things that make me feel. And moonlight and darkness make me feel. What makes you feel, Charlotte?"

"Feel? I daren't feel. And there's the truth! The world has little time for those who feel. It has a habit of crushing them - no disrespect, Beatrice. "

"Got to let Charlotte feel," said Beatrice. "And you Joshua. I know you feel, but you've got to learn not to be afraid of it. Got to be able to hold out a hand to a stranger and not worry about them rejecting you. "She leaned over then and placed a hand on top of Charlotte's.

Charlotte snatched it away as if she'd been electrocuted. "What are you playing at?"

"Trust."

"Trust? How can you trust me? I've been with your husband. Had him between my legs. How does that make you feel?"

I couldn't believe what Charlotte had just said - it was surreal - but Beatrice shook her head gently and placed her hand upon my arm. "It's just a game, Charlotte. You're very strong, and I think I like you. I'm glad you're here with us. You have a piece of Joshua, sure. Me? I have the rest. Makes us equal, don't you think?"

Charlotte gazed off into the shifting shades of grey. "You're really weird, you know that? Both of you. Feelings aren't always good. They aren't always like the touch of moonlight on your skin. There's hate as well, and fear, and jealousy, and despair that the world can be so cruel - that people can be so cruel to one another! If you two had seen what I've seen instead of living your comfortable lives, then perhaps you'd be afraid to feel as well."

"Things haven't been very comfortable for me, Charlotte," said Beatrice.

Charlotte caught her breath. "I'm sorry. Anger makes me self centred. Of course you've suffered more than anyone. But I should think you'd be afraid to feel at all,... after that."

"I'm starting to feel better now. Starting to let it go. It's not anger that makes you self centred. It's loneliness and feeling unloved. But really, you *are* loved.

Joshua loves you, and I really think that I love you too. Love is letting go, Charlotte. Love is not being afraid to feel."

I listened to all of this with a growing sense of detachment. These were words spoken as if in a dream, strange words that had the ring of absolute truths about them, but only on account of the dream, where anything, no matter how bizarre, can appear quite matter of fact. What impressed me most was the simple act of Beatrice reaching out - Beatrice who had been so damaged she'd once shrunk from all contact with others! Yet she had placed her fingers upon the back of Charlotte's hand, sought friendship, offered sympathy, and most mysterious and heroic of all, she had offered love.

She was right: we could not afford to be afraid to feel. It was only our feelings that prevented us from doing harm to others. Pure thought and reason broke down along the way and sooner or later had us believing it was all right to hurt others, or even to kill them, so long as it was for the greater good, that the loss of one innocent life might be worth the sparing of a dozen others. And then certain things cannot be known by their name, for they have no name,... only a feeling.

Beatrice had driven us from the ruin, carried on a wave of her foreboding, and now the very thing we had been led to fear seemed to have overtaken us, swallowed us, left us mesmerised and disorientated and in that deathly silence of shifting greyness, my mind began to play out its thoughts, like during the early stages of a meditation, before the calm sets in.

Thus my mind delivered me back in time to my schooldays, where I remembered playing a stupid debating game. The whole class was put in an imaginary hot air balloon that was sinking fast over a shark infested ocean, threatening the lives of everyone. The majority might be spared but only if one of us could be persuaded to jump out, and it was for each of us then to argue, on the basis of the supposed value of the imaginary occupations we had each been assigned, that we should not be the one to jump, that we were more deserving of life, more useful to the group alive than dead. Thus a policeman was compared to a petrol pump attendant, a shop assistant to a lawyer, a farmer to a collier.

But talk of such subjective worth was ridiculous. In that class debate, it would have been Beatrice who was made to jump, but not for lack of worth,... more for lack of ego and an agile, combative tongue. Our teacher was a man of sparkling wit and keen intellect who sought to arouse our gladiatorial natures, but his lesson had only left me feeling diminished, that someone had been made to jump at all.

But someone had to jump hadn't they? or we would all have perished! For me perhaps, the lesson learned was not the one intended. Whatever the point may have been, I could not be persuaded anything noble had taken place that day, at all.

I learned that the foundations of a truly civilised society actually need very

little by way of rational argument and razor wit, that in fact they require only that we refrain from hurting each other, that we seek to include everyone in the bubble of our love. And we refrain from hurting others because to hurt them has the effect of also hurting us,... provided we have not lost the capacity to feel!

And so it is that large numbers of mankind can live in close proximity. They become civilised on account of their mutual goodwill. On those occasions when great swathes of mankind are hurt, it is on account of the perpetrators successfully ignoring their feelings - for feelings can always be circumvented and our darker sides pressed into the service of ego's will to power.

If the three of us were in a balloon right now, I thought, Charlotte alone would have survived by reason of her wit. Beatrice would have talked herself into jumping, and I would have followed her, if only to keep her company on the way down. And as I fell, I would have gathered her to me, and felt sorry for Charlotte, sole survivor in a world where love and compassion and feeling, were a much devalued currency.

As I shook this peculiar daydream out of my head, a figure appeared a little way down the fellside. It was just a dark smudge on the limit of visibility. The women were looking in that direction, but apparently saw nothing. It was the other ethereal Beatrice, the shape shifter who might have resembled anyone she chose. She was waving to me, beckoning for me to follow. It was the scene from last night's dream!

"How much do you trust my imagination?" I said. "Will you follow me off this hillside?"

"We should wait, Joshua," said Beatrice.

"She's right," said Charlotte. "Ignore what I said before. Just sit it out. We'll get down soon enough."

"That makes sense of course," I replied, aware that it was me who'd urged caution in the first place. "I'm not sure how much my visions effect the pair of you, or if they're only related to my own path in life. But since you're with me, I'm guessing its something we share for now, like fellow travellers all bound for the same place. And I'm being called to follow a vision at the moment, one you can't see, one I am perhaps seeing for all of us."

Charlotte gave a shudder and I saw a line of goose bumps break out on the back of her neck. "You see something?"

"Someone. Normally she lives inside my head, but lately she's begun materialising outside of it. She's an hallucination if you like, but a particularly lucid and coherent one."

"Tell me why I would want to trust a man who obeys voices from inside his head?"

"That's why we're here, Charlotte, to listen to the voices inside of us. That's

the game we play."

On impulse, I slid the watch from my pocket, and flicked open the case. It had stopped at 3.00 p.m.. That came as a surprise: it was fully wound, and though an ancient timepiece, it was a good make, manufactured in Liverpool in 1880. Also it had been fastidiously serviced during the years of my exile and I had learned to trust it completely. The watch simply did not stop,...

"That's strange," I said.

Ellen laughed. "Strange? I'll tell you what's strange: the three of us sitting up here in fancy dress, and contemplating following one of your hallucinations!"

The Beatrice of hallucination was not put off by Ellen's concern. She continued to beckon and just then a sudden darkening of the heavens added a sense of imperative to her invitation.

"Looks like we'll get wet," said Charlotte.

Beatrice looked around, and clung more tightly to my arm. "It's coming again, Joshua. That creeping feeling. Which way do we go? I'll follow you. Charlotte, please come with us."

Initially, it was just the two of us who set off, jumped from our balloon, and the hillside fell away so steeply it truly was like falling. Charlotte waited for a while, remained safe in her basket and I gazed back anxiously, not wanting to lose sight of her. Then, to my immense relief, she gathered up the blanket and jumped after us.

We were descending the fellside, dropping rapidly, a dangerous thing to do without a map and a clear idea of the nature of the crags below. But we came down safely between them and picked up the course of a beck that could only have fed into Drummaurdale. There we emerged from the mist into an amber afternoon and an atmosphere of such a peculiar nature we all three drew up and gazed in wonder.

It was a small hanging valley, above Drummaurdale not often visited, but its geography was familiar enough, as were the outlines of the hills. In all, there was sufficient detail to set our bearings with confidence at least, but there was also an intense stillness that felt quite wrong.

I had once programmed a computer game whereby a lone figure walked in a landscape. I had spent a long time creating an evocative sky and dramatic hills for the figure to wander amongst, but I'd abandoned the project because I'd never been able to get the sound right. It was like that now, like a piece of the most realistic virtual reality, but without any sound at all, other than our own breaths and heartbeats. It was not at all natural.

"Feels funny here," said Beatrice. "Like it's frozen, like its a picture, like it's not alive."

My hallucination had gone, drifted up into the mist and dispersed, so I guessed this was where we were supposed to be. The watch was ticking now -

I heard it quite clearly in my pocket amid the stillness, and I assumed the motion of walking had coaxed it back into life, but when I drew it out, it read 7:15 p.m. We could only have been a quarter of an hour in descending this far, yet the evidence suggested we had lost four hours.

"It's early evening," I said. "We've dropped out of time somehow."

Charlotte gave me a sharp look, but it was Ellen McBride I saw staring back at me, exasperated. "That watch should be in a museum, stupid! Lucky for you I've brought my own. Look, if you don't mind, I think we should stop playing this game for a while. It's my first full day at it, and I'm more than a little spooked."

She felt in her pocket for her watch, a modern, solar powered timepiece that was alien to the game, and quite naughty of her to bring it, but she couldn't find it. "I must have dropped it," she said.

"I don't think you dropped it, Charlotte," said Beatrice, who was just then looking curiously at the boots she wore. "Like I don't think any of us stopped to change our footwear on the way down, did we?"

Charlotte lifted her skirts to reveal a pair of muddied but entirely authentic Victorian ladies boots and not the modern hiking boots she'd set out in.

"Aren't they pretty?" said Beatrice. "And you Joshua. Your boots are different, your clothes too - same colours and style but a different cloth." She fingered the material of my cuff. "Feels softer see? And my dress is a different cloth too. Moves different. Feels different. Feels lovely."

Charlotte fingered the front of her blouse, then ran her hands up and down her thighs, sampling the texture of her own clothes. "Yes,... "

"And your hair, Charlotte! Your Hair!"

"What?"

Charlotte unhooked a strand of hair from under her boater and pulled it down. It had changed colour; before, she had been as dark as Beatrice, but now was a platinum blonde

"Then I'm not,... myself?"

Our clothes were indeed different. They were not the clever facsimiles we had put on, but the genuine article, I guessed - same style, a subtly different cut and different material, an authentic material, an authentic stitch. And then there was Charlotte's hair!

"If I had to guess," I said. "I'd say we were dreaming."

Beatrice smiled one of her increasingly frequent smiles. She was enchanted by the idea. "A dream? Yes, it has the feel of a dream, Joshua. But whose? It must be my dream, because I can see it through my eyes, see you telling me it must be a dream. Except, through your eyes it must be your dream as well, mustn't it? And through Charlotte's it must be hers! Joshua, I don't understand

any of this, but it feels all right. It feels safe."

Charlotte was watching us both with a look of growing horror. We each took one of her hands. "Don't be afraid," said Beatrice.

"Charlotte, listen," I said. "Dreams can seem very real here, very vivid - it's something in the geology, do you understand? But these things tend not to last very long. It's peculiar, but it will pass. Did you never have a dream like this before? One where everything seemed very real and yet you knew that you were dreaming? You had one recently, remember? It was the dream of the old chapel! That felt real too,... well, this is the same sort of thing."

She was struggling to grasp the idea, and one could hardly blame her. Indeed we were all deeply shaken, but Charlotte's way of dealing with it was to shut it out rather than to swim with it. She was inexperienced, and for all the progress she had made, when fear struck it was Ego that came to her rescue. Normally in a dream that would have been sufficient to wake her up, but this dream held on.

"I've been drugged," she said. "Something in the food. She did it. It's right what they say: she *is* a witch! These are my own clothes, my own boots, my own hair - I just can't see them like I used to - and I dropped my watch. What was it? Did you use LSD? This feels like a psychedelic experience,... a bad trip,... a bad, bad trip." She wrenched herself free. "The pair of you did this to me! Tell me you didn't!"

If only it were that simple, I thought. "Charlotte, I don't know much about hallucinogens, but it's hours since we ate anything. Surely by now the trip would be ending, not beginning. A dream is the most likely explanation."

Beatrice was right though: who was the dreamer? I was not alone in this, and the women seemed equally lucid, though that told me nothing of course, yet as the feel of the dream deepened, I became more and more convinced that the dreamscape, as we each experienced it, was a place we shared, a place out of time, a place separate from the manifest world. This land, this valley of dreams had taken the substance of our selves and sucked it clean through the fabric of ordinary reality, drawn us into a world of pure, startling psyche.

## Chapter 44

## Mutual dreamers

I was moving into unknown territory now. For many years I had cultivated dreams and gradually come to see in them a means of interpreting the lay of one's unconscious mind. We can ignore our dreams, or we can take them seriously - either way life goes on, but the curious thing is that acceptance of irrational practices appear to be key to a more emotionally stable way of life. At one level it makes no sense to believe, for example, in one's horoscope, because I'm sure many newspapers simply make them up. But if we allow ourselves to believe, such things can be a comfort to us. It does not make them real. It does not make them true. But they can heal us all the same.

Thus, for a long time, and throughout my earliest awakenings, had run the train of my own thoughts concerning the intangible, irrational world and its esoteric arts - what others might call the occult. Belief, I discovered, was like the opening of a safety valve so the pressure of one's life could be made to vent harmlessly. You tell yourself it's all nonsense really, a harmless distraction, and by this means we encourage the irrational side of our natures to get along with the rational. But then something happens, something that cannot be explained in rational terms, and you must accept the validity of at least a part of what you think you believe in. Something happens, and it becomes no longer a matter of belief, but knowing.

As you might have gathered from this narrative, my own dreams had become rather more direct than normal in their approach, even spilling over into waking visions - the projection of what in more ancient times might have been called spirits. Yet in all of this there had never been anything to suggest these startling phenomena originated from anywhere other than inside my own head. It was all a delusion, a growing one perhaps, but not yet socially unacceptable, not yet worthy of detention under the Mental Health Act.

There are many ways the irrational can cross the line. It can be a premonition, an out of body experience, and to my mind perhaps most startling of all, it can be a shared dream. In a shared dream, we can no longer claim that the territory, the mind-space, is personal. It becomes mutual and therefore independent of the heads of any participating dreamer. Few people will acknowledge the existence of shared dreams, and I had not dared believe in them myself until then. But exist they do and they make a nonsense of the rational interpretation of the nature of reality.

"It is a dream," I told myself. "I am dreaming. Now wake up."

But still the dream held on.

I felt the wind upon my face, I saw the shadows moving over Drummaur Fell, I saw the low sunlight glinting off the windows of Cragside far below, and I

saw the women before me in such intimate detail - every thread, every tiny hair, every pore of their skin. And their scent filled me with a longing to gather them to me and dissolve myself in their combined loveliness.

Cragside was still there, still looking the same. I could not bend its walls by thinking about it, nor could I perform other extraordinary feats like walking through trees or flying through the air, which was rather disappointing. And all the time, as I walked, I willed myself to wake up. It was the others I thought: Beatrice and Charlotte - they were holding on to me, for unless they woke too, I was trapped here by their unconscious volition, as they were trapped by mine.

We found the key in the usual place, concealed behind the loose stone in the wall, by the gate. The gate squealed as normal when we opened it - the sights, the sounds we made, all were authentic. Inside, the house welcomed us with its familiar scent, and in the parlour, on the desk there lay The Changes, as I had left them. I could not will them to disappear and I was glad of it, for I reckoned I would have need of their counsel very soon.

I checked the time by the clock in the kitchen. It agreed perfectly with my watch, the pair running in sync as they had been doing these past ten years. So far nothing confirmed the notion of the dream - except for the small matter of our clothes, and Charlotte's hair, and the fact that I knew my watch had stopped on the fell. Going back outside though, I noted the cabin was of a different design. Inside there was no wardrobe, no dusty hangers holding the remains of Amanda Fleetwood's clothes, and in the woods, across the beck, there was no Landrover, nor sign of any tyre marks in the soft earth.

If it was a dream, then the world in which it was being played out seemed curiously selective in its similarities. It was not 1900, nor any other historically accurate period, or the Book of Changes would not have been there - The translation I used did not appear in English until the middle of the 20th century, and therefore could not pass Cragside's test of authenticity!

But why the clothes?

Charlotte sat expectantly in the parlour, a mirror in her hand through which she had been gazing in shocked silence at her hair. Beatrice was perched upon the arm of the chair, a comforting hand upon Charlotte's shoulder.

"Well, Joshua?" she asked.

Her voice sounded so clear, so lucid now. And there was something else: I felt her thoughts - literally felt them in my breast. There was empathy and compassion - and there was love. Could she also then feel my own thoughts?

"The Landrover's gone," I said. "This is not the world we woke up to this morning."

Charlotte looked pale. "I should get back to Fernlea. I might wake up there. I might be able to escape this."

By contrast, I felt in her a curious jangling mixture of passion, fear and longing.

"We'll all go," I said. "But in the morning." I was distracted by the uneasy tangle of her emotions. "You must stay with us, tonight, Charlotte. Is that all right, Beatrice?"

"Yes, of course Charlotte must stay. But tell me Joshua, where are we sleeping?"

"We have a spare room. Charlotte could use that."

"No, I meant, if we are dreaming this house now, dreaming these bodies, then where are our other bodies, our ordinary, everyday bodies?"

Beatrice was not afraid. There was only a sense of wonderment and curiosity.

"I don't know," I replied. "Up on the fell somewhere, I imagine. How we walked into this I've no idea. It seems unlikely we dozed off."

"Depends when this began, I suppose," she mused. "Could we still not have left the house, do you think? Could we not still be in bed this morning, you know? Still asleep and dreaming this whole day? Dreaming Charlotte? Dreaming the walk, the old chapel, everything?"

Charlotte licked her dry lips. "Then I'm not really here? Believe me, I wish I wasn't, but I'm afraid I am - though you only have my word for that of course. But if we're dreaming, we don't need sleep, don't need to eat, don't - if you'll pardon me - need to use the toilet and I could cut off my finger, confident that it would grow back. No: I'm still not convinced. I don't intend testing it by cutting off my finger, but I do need to use the toilet, so if you'll excuse me."

I was left alone with Beatrice, left staring at her, feeling myself drawn into the warm dark depths of her soft beauty. There seemed a shadowyness about her face and her hair, and she possessed an ever deepening yin stillness that contrasted sharply with the rising yang radiance of Charlotte. Charlotte had achieved great femininity, but also a part of her ego had reclaimed her, which meant that she really should not have been there at all.

Beatrice read my thoughts. "She's very frightened," she said. "We must look after her, Joshua."

"How did you know I was thinking of Charlotte?"

"I felt it, just like I feel your confusion when you look at me. You want me in bed, but feel you shouldn't. Feel guilty because it might be naughty to desire someone as simple as me." She gave a little shrug. "But it's okay to desire me, Joshua. It's okay because I can feel desire right back."

"Can you also feel my fear?"

"Yes. It makes me want to take your hand. Be a mother for you. But you fight that. You don’t want Beatrice to be your mother. You want her to be something else." She sighed. "Listen! I've been some bad places inside my

head, Joshua. You know that. I mean, this is strange, but it's not bad. Like those lights, remember? And the rain? Remember how it rained? But there was nothing to fear, really, was there? You told me that.

"Ah! Now I feel a something different in you, like you didn't mean those words, and now you're guilty about that too. Why? Could it be you said them just to comfort me? Well, that's okay. But this is different and it's okay to trust those words, my love."

"So long as we're not afraid," I said. "There'll be no reason to fear the dream. It's just that if one of us is really, really scared,..."

"Like Charlotte?"

"If we're not careful, we could end up in a nightmare of her making. Even our being afraid of that happening increases the chances of it. We need you, Beatrice. You are the key to this place. We need your innocence to protect us from the dark side of ourselves."

She thought about this. "I could live here, I think, dream or not. Sure, maybe the dream would be better, but I can see how the two of you might want to wake up. Perhaps if we slept - I mean in the dream, in this dream, then we'd wake up to ourselves in the real world."

"Sleep?"

"You think it's stupid? Too simple?"

"No. I think it's a good idea, but I've a feeling something might have to happen first, I mean before we're released from this, something that has to do with the purpose of it."

"Purpose? Why should there be a purpose? Maybe we all three just fell down a hole, Joshua."

She chuckled: Humour! Simple, uncomplicated, undaunted, and slippery as wet soap. Such is innocence, and I chuckled with her. How comforting was the presence of Beatrice in that strange world!

"And we should sleep together," she went on. "Not just you and me. All of us, keep together and touching - else in waking up, one of us might be lost."

"Well, you can try convincing Charlotte of the logic in that, but I'm afraid she might not share our Bohemian ways."

"Bohemian? Just because this is a dream doesn't make me understand the words you use? You think Charlotte might be too shy? Is that what you mean?"

"Something like that, yes."

"But we're all friends, aren't we? Seen you naked Joshua, like you've seen her. And I think Charlotte's confused enough about how she feels when she's with me to go along."

"How do you mean? How is Charlotte confused?"

"She aches when she looks at me. She doesn't want to because she thinks she shouldn't even like me, on account of me being weak and stupid. But she aches for me - same as you do."

There is a fine line between insight and delusion. There is a moment, an inkling, and then a landslide of thought that reveals an unexpected truth, but one that feels instinctively right. "You mean she desires you? You felt her *desire*, like you felt mine? A *sexual* desire?"

"Seemed about the same to me," she said. "Isn't it strange? You might live your whole life with someone and never know how they really feel when they're with you. Ask me, Joshua, this knowing how others are feeling saves a lot of time."

But I was not considering the efficiency of such a heightened empathic sense. I was more concerned with what the news of Charlotte's apparently Sapphic infatuation meant, for surely she did not desire Beatrice in waking reality! Or had her excessive Yangness led to a domination by her own animus - her own male soul? Had she reverted these past ten days and become so masculine a woman she truly desired women? I remembered our conversation, months ago in the cool mist of the Blackstone pass, remembered she'd expressed some confusion over her sexuality - but since then we'd made love,... could Charlotte be heterosexual, and Ellen Lesbian? Heavens, this was testing me, but it didn't matter because none of it was true. In a moment, we might wake up and forget we had ever been here.

"Perhaps in this version of the story," I mused, "it's Charlotte and Beatrice who are the lovers, and Joshua the willing cuckold. But what would be the purpose of such a love?"

"Your confusion's getting much worse, Joshua. You must stop! It hurts to feel inside your head! Let your thoughts be free. Don't pin them down and grind away at them like that. How can you bear it?"

"I'm sorry. You're right. But how does it make you feel, knowing how she feels when she looks at you?"

"It's a strange game for me to play, but I don't mind. She's nice, really she is, but looks too stiff to cuddle."

Charlotte returned. It was Beatrice who saw her first and her expression forewarned me. Charlotte was before us and naked with a suddenness that only dreams will allow. She was apparently unabashed, indeed she invited us with open palms to observe her. Seeing our raised eyebrows, she gave a shrug. "What? This isn't my skin. Why should I care who sees it? Well look at it? Is this the skin of a woman nearing forty? Matthew - you've seen pretty much every inch of my skin. Do you recognise this body?"

I had to admit I did not. This was the body of a much younger woman, a very fine skin, pale and milky, a sculpture of potent roundness: her breasts, her

hips, her derriere - all smooth, all unblemished. No, this was not Ellen McBride, this really was Charlotte Culcheith - in her prime.

"You look twenty five at the most," I said, and I became aroused quickly because it was a long time since I'd seen the soft perfection of a twenty-five year old woman's body.

Inside of Charlotte, I sensed an overwhelming power and also a pride in this new found perfection. I felt in her a desire to attract, a desire for love, a desire to be an object of desire, but it was Beatrice she was looking at when she felt all of this. As for me, I felt the sudden wriggling rat of an unexpected jealousy, which I took at once by the scruff of its neck and held up to the light of my disbelief. Beatrice watched the turmoil of my thoughts and, turning to me suddenly, she smiled, then placed a hand upon my arm, a tender act that caused the power of Charlotte's desire to suddenly implode, to become poisoned and dangerous when she sensed Beatrice's affection for me.

I was startled to feel all of this, and I drew back. "Stop!" I said. "This is impossible. We'll all go mad!"

The rat wriggled in my grip, struggling to be free, and it struggled all the more when Beatrice approached the naked and achingly beautiful Charlotte and gathered her up in a tender embrace. "It's all right, Charlotte," she said. "I want to be with you too - really I do - it's all right my love. Come to me now."

I watched as Charlotte's head rested submissively against Beatrice's shoulder, watched as her body became limp against her.

Beatrice oozed an innocent compassion and an unconditional love, the love of a parent for its child. "Like this, Charlotte. We can be like this. Always. For ever."

Then I felt Charlotte, felt a tide of love and warmth wash through her bones at the feel of Beatrice. And feeling it in her, I felt it overwhelmingly in me also, so that the focus of the room seemed to soften with our mutual love for her, and her love for us.

Then Charlotte wept.

I felt confusion in her. There was a mixture of shame and longing before she submitted to the tide. I felt her sadness then, years of sadness, but her tears were tears of healing. Beatrice had been the shadow of Charlotte’s self, the shadow she could not permit herself to become, and in yielding, in drawing comfort and expressing such a need, she sealed the rift within herself, became complete. And as she held on to Beatrice, I felt a renewal and a restoration of yin softness flooding her like silvery moonlight.

"God help me," Charlotte moaned. "What's happening?" And as she spoke, she reached out for me, her fingers wriggling, feeling their way back to the flesh she had once known in me, some other time, some other life, but I dared not approach her now. This was a different kind of alchemy.

"Surrender to it, Charlotte. Surrender to Beatrice. Surrender to what you feel."

The rat vanished and I was overwhelmed by compassion for them both, a feeling they at once mirrored back to me, and so we became a hall of mirrors, each of us mirroring an infinity of love. It caused a vibration that turned the world liquid, a wave of harmony that reached an astonishing and indescribable resonance, until I could not only feel every subtle nuance of what the others felt, but I also knew their thoughts, as they knew mine. Our separateness was revealed once more to be an intricate illusion and I saw we were the same.

We were the same! We had become love! We had become compassion!

## Chapter 45

## Delirium

Dream delirium is a wonderful thing. It strikes at one's emotional core, irrespective of the defences one might have spent a lifetime surrounding it with. But I suspect this is an illusion, and that in fact emotion has nothing whatever to do with it. In computer programming parlance, the emotional subroutines in a dream are bypassed altogether and we engage on a deeper level, a level at which we are able to experience the truly euphoric nature of the cosmos. The cosmos *is* euphoria. Of course such an overpowering sweetness as this is usually guaranteed to wake you up, drag you back blinking into the mundane light of your every day reality, leave you groaning at its loss and cursing in the knowledge that your biological being can never provide the means of such a faultless fulfilment.

But for the three of us, the dream held on.

The women embraced for a long time, but gradually Beatrice, grew uncomfortable from standing, and from the weight of Charlotte upon her, so she eased herself down upon the sofa, coaxing Charlotte down with her, so that they lay together, each lost in the feel of the other.

By now the fire consisted only of the glowing remains of itself, so I added kindling and coal from the scuttle, quietly building it until the room was warm and lit with amber once more. Then I found a soft blanket to cover them, and I settled back in an armchair, with the Changes and Ghita's bangle for comfort. For a while I just watched the women, running the bangle through my fingers, trying all the while not to think about what it meant, tried not to think at all, but sought only to bathe myself in the profound stillness of the moment. And when my mind was empty of all intention, of all pattern and structure, I asked the Changes:

*Inner Truth*, it said: *The path is correct in every respect, but beware Ego, or the path might close and all that has been gained be lost in a heartbeat.*

Inner Truth!

It is the most mysterious of states; the source of all understanding, an acceptance of infinite ambiguity, a vision of emptiness and the illusion of our biological being, the illusion that we are no more than a bag of bones. Inner truth is, amongst other things, the understanding that the seat of our consciousness is not contained nor even sustained by that biology. When we come to see the universe this way, then many things are possible.

I dared not move now for fear of disturbing them, for fear of disturbing this moment with ripples of unrest, for fear of disturbing the feel of the room, indeed of the dream that contained us. They remained awake, but motionless, and all but melted into one another, so closely they lay beneath the blanket. I

eased myself back and shared in their delirium, gradually to lose my grip upon the dream and to wake, or to sleep, I know not which,.. to find myself coming around almost at once it seemed, feeling refreshed, with dawn at the window and the fire turned to ash.

It was such a sudden thing and at first I felt the loss of the dream like the loss of a loved one but then to my relief I saw that Beatrice and Charlotte still lay, insensible now, beside me on the sofa, and then I saw there was another sitting upright and expectant in the chair opposite. She was dressed in the ivory silk and lace of an Edwardian lady, and I did not know her form, for it was taller and more slender than I had experienced before, and her face was soft and round and delicately formed, her lips a tiny Cupid's bow. But I knew this shape-shifting spirit well enough by now.

"You warned me the way would become strange."

"Yes," she replied. "But you seem to be navigating competently."

"I somehow doubt that. I mean, I don't even know if I'm awake now and hallucinating you, or if I'm merely dreaming - though the expression *merely* dreaming doesn't comfort me as much as it once might have done."

"You could think of it perhaps as a dream within a dream," she replied. "You have separated from the tangle of their presence,... at least for a while. Do they not look happy together? Such a love is very touching is it not?"

"Yes, and unexpected, also unconventional for the times. Is this what should have happened once, do you think? Are we seeing something that should have been? I know it must be true, but what is Joshua's role in all of this? What could Joshua not do then, that he must do now?"

"You know the right path is always the right path, no matter how unexpectedly it turns."

"Of course."

"Even if it means facing your own premature end?"

I caught my breath and felt a slow numbness spreading. "My death? Yes,... I suppose one can't avoid such a thing - if the time has come."

"Will you be afraid to die, do you think?"

"Yes,... no,... no,... because you will be there, waiting, won't you?"

"Yes. I will be waiting."

"Then, I can bear it."

"It's a hard thing to accept. But this knowledge sets you free, my love."

"Yes,.... yes, I understand."

"Beatrice must survive. Look at her lying there so peacefully, so full of compassion and innocence. Joshua has the power to grant this. Let Joshua do

his own bidding through Matthew, and all will turn out as it should."

"I'll do my best, but you know I'm also afraid of doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. It all seems so delicately poised - dreams within dreams, layers of insight hidden between layers of delusion. How will I know? How will I know what the right thing is?"

"By not thinking of it, my love, but by being Joshua for her, one last time."

I felt saddened now, and as I gazed at her sleeping form, I knew how dearly I would miss her. "The last time?"

"Try not to think of it, my love and remember that I am always with you. Now tell me a story."

"A story?"

"Tell me this story as you see it"

How did I see it? Did I see it at all? I shook my head and sighed, then read the contents of my mind, like taking cards from a tall stack, one after the other.

"This is a story in layers," I began. "Each one transparent and changing. Only the characters are the same. In this version I see that Joshua and Beatrice were married, I feel sure of it, and that she carried his child,... but Joshua also had a mistress, Charlotte, or was that before? Yes, that was before,..."

"Go on, my love."

"In this version, Charlotte is not Joshua's mistress but Beatrice's lover. The love of Joshua and Beatrice might have been important in other versions, but not in this one. Here Charlotte and Beatrice are the lovers, something that would not have been at all respectable nor easily disguised in a rural community in 19th century England. It would have to have been kept secret,... a dark, brooding secret.

"Yet, wait,.... Joshua loved them both,... physically perhaps, for Beatrice said something curious this morning about them both being his women, and him their man - this has yet to be resolved, but my feeling is he eventually became more of a brother for them, perhaps, or some other way that rendered him totally accepting, and neutral towards his apparent redundancy. This would also have lent to everything a veneer of respectability.

"Meanwhile Thaddeus seeks to possess what he believes Joshua has - this has always been the case, the common factor in all the histories. Thaddeus is driven by something in Beatrice he cannot understand and can never hope to possess - like Joshua. But where Thaddeus is driven to violence, Joshua is at peace with it.

"So what did Thaddeus do? He did not murder Beatrice. We've seen her grave, and she lived to a generous old age, as did Joshua and Charlotte. But did I dream that as a vision of how things ought to have been,... a menage a trois that played out its time in Drummaurdale, but didn't quite, and all

because of Thaddeus, because of my brother? Then what we've seen so far is a picture of how it *must* be, but isn't yet."

"Tell me about your brother, Joshua."

"Thaddeus?"

What did I know about Thaddeus? Until that day in recent times, I had not seen him in a decade, and before that for over a century. He was the Lizard man. His domain was the Seven Sister's Campsite, now long gone. He was the three night rule, and he was the face of a greed that did not care and was too blind to see the harm in its ways. Nor did he understand the power of Eros if he thought it could be bound and taken by force. When souls come together in a way that is mutually supportive, it is good. But when one seeks to deny, or to destroy the other, things always turn out bad, or corrupt,... or evil.

I felt my arm, my elbow, where it had been injured by Thaddeus, but the dream had healed it, healed it long ago. Beatrice was right then. We were still asleep in the blue bedroom, I could see that now. We had yet to meet Charlotte, yet to dine, yet to walk out as the three players onto the stage of the Drummaur Valley, yet to see our tombstones by the ruined chapel.

"He will come," I said.

She smiled, though her eyes were sad. "Yes, he will come."

"And I will give up my life to save hers, so the love of these two women can fill this valley with its forbidden secret!"

"Their love is not the essential thing, but it must be given a chance."

"Can we play with time like that? Surely what was done is done? They were denied that chance once, and now? These two women are not natural lovers, they cannot recreate what the real Beatrice and Charlotte must have felt for each other, I mean outside of this shared dream of ours. It would go against their natures. We cannot carry this sweet delirium through into the manifest world. It means nothing there. Only here can we feel it, in the dream. Out there it turns to dust!"

"You forget the child, my love."

"Beatrice isn't really pregnant."

"The child must be given a chance," she repeated.

The vision faded so that I might have woken up, but it was not to the blue bedroom that my consciousness surfaced: it was momentarily to the parlour with Beatrice and Charlotte still sleeping beside me, and the fire restored to a cherry red, and the chair opposite was vacated of the spirit in my head.

I drew the watch from my waistcoat, slowly, testing the feel of this reality by the run of the watch-chain against my thumb. It was exquisite, as indeed seemed every sensory experience I focused upon. It was 2 am, but whether that meant anything here I could not tell.

Were they dreaming too, another layer of this dream? Had their dream sheared off to a life together, without Joshua? I knelt beside them, placed my hands upon their sleeping heads, pressed together forehead to forehead and I felt the texture of their hair. Beatrice's was dark and soft and warm. Charlotte's was cool and smooth and bright. Their hair had merged upon the blanket, curls interlocking curls, in places forming a stylised version of the Tai Chi, the Yin and Yang. And their breath mingled, rising with the scent of lavender and rose.

If they remembered any of this, I thought, they would be embarrassed, and yet, for all of that, the impending loss of this moment, this feeling, would be a hard one to bear. I kissed them both, and made my way upstairs, to the blue bedroom, where in another version of this story, the woman who was Beatrice lay with me. And not with Charlotte.

## Chapter 46

## The death of Joshua

I slept in order to wake up and, in waking, finally surfaced to the light of a day I had already lived, but also, curiously, a day that had yet to be lived. As you might appreciate, this caused some confusion and I lay a while, regaining my bearings, calming my emotions, but above all resigning myself to the loss of that remarkably clear headed euphoria, the loss of that heightened awareness, an awareness that seemed to be not living, but pure being. And it is the hardest thing to let go of something that is more real than the thing you have always taken for reality.

Beatrice too began to stir, and was puzzled, though not alarmed, to find herself lying against me, both of us snug beneath the blankets.

She spoke sleepily: "Joshua? Is it you?"

"Yes," I said. "We are in my bed, in my room. We have experienced a false awakening, the both of us. It was an extraordinary thing, a rare thing. You should lie still for a while. It might be some time before we can adjust to normality."

Normality? Had I really said normality?

"Is Charlotte gone?" she asked.

"She never came,... we are awake now, the dream we shared is over."

She was confused,... slipping between the dream and reality. "Did none of it happen?"

"It happened, yes, only not in the usual way of things. Lie still now and let the day wash over you."

I was reminded of my inability to feel her feelings. I felt how isolated I was from her, locked inside my skin, as she was isolated from me, for such is the human condition, and it saddened me: we are so lonely, so lost without a sense of each other.

I felt her breaths, rapid and shallow as the memories returned to her. Then she grew rigid with shock. "But Joshua,... Charlotte and me?"

"I know. Don't be afraid. It was the most beautiful thing, Beatrice."

"But,... will she know?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it. But it was a dream, remember, and all things are permitted in dreams."

"I'm not sure, Joshua. Feels funny. Where is Charlotte now? Have we left her behind?"

"This is still the tenth day. Charlotte will come to us from Fearnlea. She is on her way to us now. I know it!"

"But how will I look her in the eye? I can't see her. Not after last night: I'd be embarrassed."

"Remember, it was Charlotte who desired you. You responded to her with kindness and love, that's all. It's Charlotte who will be the most embarrassed, I think."

She raised herself from bed and stood a while with her chin resting in her hands. "Should we not say anything, then? Let her think the dream was her own, and ordinary, not shared, then she won't be embarrassed? Only we would know it - you and me. That would be the kindest thing, wouldn't it?"

"It might, except, she'll be afraid, having lived a whole day, and then lost it. We'll have to explain it to her."

"I know. It's just that I'm not sure I can play that kind of game with her . No, Joshua! Would you want to touch a man that way, even if you'd dreamed it, and even if it felt good in the dream? No, you'd wake up and be ashamed you could ever dream such a thing."

She was so wise at times, the things she asked,... and I felt so inadequate in my replies and with my cheap reassurances. "Perhaps only in another version of this story, are you and she lovers. Forget about the actions, the things you might or might not have done: it was the feeling,... the *feeling* that was important."

"I remember the feeling. I felt we were lovers. Felt it deep. Felt her head against my pillows, Joshua, and it felt the same as if it had been you lying there. Felt all sorts of things towards the end, you know. Felt your heart beating Joshua. Felt hers. Felt every single thing in you, and her."

"I know."

"Then maybe I *can* be that way,... be a lover for you both. Might be worth it for that feeling, Joshua. Do you think?"

"I think in living, we might search our whole lives and never experience that feeling again. We no longer understand sex, Beatrice. Our kind has been two thousand years denying its existence, and now we have no idea how to live with it any more, how to control it, how to be with it. The man in me would dearly like to uncover your breasts and lay his head against them. In my current frame of mind it would be a profoundly erotic act, but ego would not let me be satisfied with it, no matter how much it moved me. I would always want just one thing more, until you had nothing left to give me."

"Then we must not think of it, Joshua."

"But the dream makes us think of it, doesn't it? The dream makes us wonder. And then in waking we realise the feeling will be elusive. It would show itself, then hide, and the man in me would have to gorge himself on every

inch of you in search of it, and he would never find it. But in the dream - in the dream, all he would have to do is lay his head against your breast,... or not even that: In the dream, he would only have to look into your eyes, and there it would be."

"Then it seems cruel - to be shown it in the dream, only be told we can never have it for real."

"Unless the dream was showing us the way," I said, but then I remembered the possibility that Joshua was no longer part of that way, that soon perhaps there would only be Beatrice and Charlotte,... to carry on alone.

"Joshua, what is it?"

"It's nothing, my love. We should not dismiss the dream. What it showed us was important, and we should build on it as if it *were* real."

"Build? Talk sense to me, Joshua!"

"In the dream, I think you came to like Charlotte very well."

"Yes."

"When she comes today, I think you'll find she is no longer a stranger to you. Let her be your friend, if you feel you can. And be a friend for her."

We began the day like any other, tidy, dressed, and civilised - salvaging the fire in the range, brewing tea and speaking with the measured politeness of strangers, as if nothing had passed between us at all. And when the knock came at the door, it was Charlotte we both pictured in our minds, as we were expecting her. I rose to answer it, but Beatrice pressed me down into the chair, smiling.

"It should be me," she said. "I'll go. I'll be her friend., like you said."

She was excited, so I let her go, but then in the corner of my eye I caught the fleeting image of another Beatrice, the Beatrice from the dream within the dream, and I knew that something was wrong, that things were running out of control suddenly.

"Beatrice! Wait!"

I do not recall thinking much about my actions. One moment I was in the chair, and the next I was being propelled through the house by an unconscious volition. I ran, slithering on the polished floor, but she had already opened the door when I caught up with her, flooded the hallway with light and with the shadow of Thaddeus which now fell across us both. He held a shot gun, low, against his hip and he was in the process of levelling it at her middle.

I swear I could hear him saying: "Three nights, you'll have to stay for three nights." And I heard myself reply from somewhere long ago: "That seems somewhat greedy to me."

I felt Joshua's horror on that morning, a morning that might have been, or

might yet be, and the only thing that was different this time was the insight that had spurred him into action, an insight, born of Matthew's peculiar turn of mind, granting him the time to take his love by the waist and heave her aside,...

But for Thaddeus, the train of events had been set in motion with the opening of the door, and things were unstoppable now, like a heavily laden truck that takes an age to pull up, and so it was beyond his power to alter the course of his own destiny even though it was now Joshua, his brother who knelt with the barrel at his head and watched wide eyed as the hammers fell.

In a suburban house, a hundred miles away, a handsome woman by the name of Ghita Singh sat quiet and still in a sanctuary of soft carpets and silk cushions. But she found herself struggling with her meditation, unable to focus on her breath. Stray thoughts came and went, playing like puppies, circling and pirouetting about the axis of her mind. At first she found it perplexing, for these were things that troubled only beginners in the art, but then, curious, she followed the ripples of disturbance to where they led.

Suddenly her eyes snapped open. She felt a chill. She heard a woman scream, and then another woman calling. It was somewhere in time, another time, a terrible morning, a morning of murder. Beads of sweat broke out upon her brow and she shivered, but she did not move: she remained focused and searching, unravelling threads in time and listening to the voices that spoke of something grave, something momentous in the making, something long restrained surging forcibly from the immanent world into the manifest. And through the eyes of a man called Joshua she saw the hammers fall.

It was the blinking of an eye to me, but time is relative and even a moment can be expanded to eternity if you know how. Thus it was that Ghita watched the hammers begin their oily arc, and she held them there a while. They spelled the end for Joshua, and in a version of this story, she understood that Thaddeus killed his brother, as in another he murdered Beatrice, and ended also the life of the child she might or might not be carrying - possibilities carried through into certainty, futures set at the tossing of a coin. All these things Ghita saw in the threads of time, but in another version, she reasoned, the cartridges were old, or the powder was wet and the charges did not ignite.

Click!

And in another,....

I watched the hammers fall, and heard the shot, which was strange, for surely one does not hear the gun that shoots you dead at such close quarters? I knelt paralysed with shock, too stunned, too numb, too stupid even to duck - and also slow to realise that Thaddeus was lazy and slovenly, and ignorant - that if he kept a gun at all, the chances were he'd not cleaned it, or used it in twenty years, that it wasn't a new gun in the first place and a wiser man would not have dared to fire it for fear of accidents.

It might have worked. Had Beatrice been standing there, offering herself to that filthy gun it might have worked, as in another version of this tale it did once, long ago, possibly, and killed her. But for now, the breech was by reason of fate more inclined to veer off upon another course. It exploded and a good deal of its remains ended up inside of Thaddeus' considerable bulk, from where surgeons would spend decades of his life untangling the bits that, from time to time, would plague him.

For sure, Joshua faced his shadow well that morning and I admired him for it, but it did cost him his life, of that I'm certain because I felt Joshua slipping away from me, from Matthew, leaving me suddenly beached upon the shore of an unfamiliar present, surrounded now by actors from a most peculiar past. Beatrice lay stunned beside me in the hallway, and then, trampling over Thaddeus, came Charlotte. She knelt into my field of vision, slapped me, as was her way when roused, and she sucked up the remains of my consciousness, stopped me from drowning in a tempestuous sea of shock.

"Mr. Rowan? Mr. Rowan?"

"Ghita?"

"No, it's me!"

Thaddeus had begun to crawl away, leaving a thin trail of blood upon the cobbles and the grass. I watched him slithering, trailing a leg like a half crushed slug, and it troubled me that I seemed to care nothing for him - after all, he was my brother wasn't he?

It was Ghita who had saved me. I knew because I had felt her presence enveloping me, and caught also her unmistakable scent. It was still there - sandalwood, lending an exotic spice to the lavender and the rose. It was as I had remembered the feel of her during the practices, a warm encircling magnetism, her love, her peace, her patience as she guided me to the light. Ghita had felt the moment,... and she had changed it!

I rose unsteadily and followed the wounded Thaddeus, who was on his feet and limping now, burned and bleeding. When he saw me gaining upon him, he flinched and leaned against the garden wall, his breathing ragged, his face white with shock. His fear of me was both intense and irrational.

"What?" he said, as if to challenge me for an explanation of his own madness.

As I looked at him I felt myself to be inhumanly detached and impartial in my observations. "You were nothing to me," I said, in sudden realisation of the truth. "You were Joshua's shadow, not mine."

"Joshua?"

"You're a man of two dimensions. There's no substance to you at all."

It's true, I was amazed that one who had once been so threatening could seem as helpless as the rest of us. "Is there nothing that can possibly redeem you, Thaddeus?"

"Thaddeus? Who the fuck's Thaddeus!"

He needed help, for truly his self inflicted injuries were grievous and most unpleasant to look at. I should have driven him to the hospital, but I turned instead to Beatrice and by the time I thought of him again he was gone. How he explained himself to others who must have found him in that state I do not know, nor even if he survived. We never saw him again.

Charlotte was in the hallway, kneeling over Beatrice who was pale and trembling. There was an abiding stench of gunpowder and vaporised oil. It was a miracle the cartridges had not worked at all, and exploded backwards out of the gun,... but like the gun, the cartridges also might have been old and neglected. Beatrice had reached up and was stroking Charlotte's hair. "Charlotte," she said, her voice dazed, blurred, confused. "Dear Charlotte. I did so like it when your hair was blonde!"

Charlotte froze. "You saw my hair?"

Beatrice nodded, breathing deeper now, pulling herself together, her shock turning to compassion. "It's all right. There's so much to tell." She raised an eyebrow. "And we were both so much younger then, my love."

"Then it was truly you?"

"Yes. But look, here's Joshua." She eased herself to her feet and placed a hand upon her womb, stroking it with a calm, circular motion. "Don't be afraid, Joshua, I'm not hurt,... and the baby's fine."

But it was Matthew who stood before them, feeling something stirring in his soul. There was emptiness and a sense of loss - their loss. They were strangers to him, and Joshua was dead.

## Chapter 47

## Innocence lost

I had been Joshua since that first night with Amanda Fleetwood, a decade ago, since that first invitation to be Joshua for her, and I felt empty now without him. I felt suddenly rooted to the ground by the weary bones of Matthew Rowan, unable to fly, unable to surf the shifting currents of this place with the same agility as I once had, in the days when Joshua and I were truly one. The visions also faded for a while, the dreams became mundane, and Beatrice no longer came in the darkness to my bed, because even though I had not admitted to my imposture, I fancied she had gradually come to realise I was no longer Joshua. She seemed to let him go, perhaps knowing all along that the price of motherhood would be the loss of the man she loved.

For me, for Matthew, I was left to wonder about my future in that place - for sure I feared I would one day have to make my way back into the world. My only hope was that the death of Joshua had been just a stage in a greater process of transformation. The end was still mysterious to me, and this brief interlude threatened to dissolve into a dangerous period of moody instability. I had expected a reward for my ordeal, you see? The Beatrice of my inner vision had spoken of union, the marriage of my king to her queen, and anyway, had I not stared death in the face for her? Had I not knelt before Thaddeus!

But really, there are no rewards in life, other than the eerie pleasure one gains from an intuitive knowledge of the correctness of one's path, even though it might run counter to one's earlier expectations. If we tread the path well, we invite happiness, but even thinking about it can be enough to make us lose our way.

Thus it was I seemed to stumble. The game changed. The path heaved itself sideways and its suddenness caught Matthew unawares, shaking him off his feet and leaving him bewildered, sitting in the wayside grasses, nursing his confusion. It had sidelined him, it seemed, and in his place, it had drawn Charlotte in.

I should explain certain practical matters that occurred during the weeks following the death of Joshua - number one among them being that Ellen McBride was finally dismissed from the police service. This meant nothing to her, beyond causing some financial hardship, which meant it would be necessary for her to give up the lease on Fernlea. Charlotte had also become a frequent visitor to Cragside, falling into a wary friendship with Beatrice, helping her around the house, helping me around the garden. And it was Beatrice who suggested that it made no sense Charlotte walking home each time, and when she lost her home, it made perfect sense that she came to stay with us.

She understood the rules of the game and played them well, eventually walking into Drummaurdale, an elegant Edwardian lady, intent on living an illusion to the full. Her only concession to modernity was the treatment she had used to make her hair blonde, and she had done this because, as she explained it to me, she had wanted to please Beatrice, wanted to make things as close to the dream as possible. And Beatrice had so liked her hair.

By the time Charlotte came to us, nothing at all of Ellen McBride remained. And Charlotte was a strange creature, strong and sensual. Indeed she had become the antithesis of Ellen and might have been a poet or a romantic artist of the Pre-Raphelite School. She also possessed a curious longing and therein lay the roots of her own peril, for it had become clear to me that, incredible though it may seem, Charlotte was truly fascinated by Beatrice.

This was not a straight forward matter - as Min had taught me, sexuality never is. I would observe Charlotte hovering around Beatrice in a protective and an adoring way. And of an evening, while I bent over my journals and the Changes, the women would take turns brushing out each other's hair, the one dark as night, and other bright as the sun. I would surreptitiously observe their long slow movements, actions that were mesmerising for both giver and receiver. And for me the brush would spark with an unseen electricity that filled the room.

Their actions were quiet and natural, the sisterly familiarity between them arising suddenly and was eerie to witness. Beatrice told me this was easy for them as they had dreamed their life together before in such lucid detail that they seemed now to be merely picking up from where the dream had left off. And what these women began to weave by merely being around each other was an atmosphere of deep loving, but it was love without an object, without any apparent desire for consummation. They were neither lovers, nor sisters. Like the dream, their love seemed to exist outside of time, requiring no further sustenance than simply the fact of its own existence.

They had no difficulty with this and the only person to struggle with it was a newly time-bound Matthew. It was too much for me, and I would often retire, with apologies, to the cool and quiet sanctuary my room. There I would ache with a purely masculine desire that I was able to control only by the self administration of the Practices. At first there seemed to be no danger in this because I told myself I could easily detach myself: it was not Charlotte, not Beatrice I desired, but desire itself. But in so detaching himself, Matthew Rowan could not help but put himself outside of the game and he began to feel like a voyeur, like an outsider in his own house.

Beatrice no longer came to his bed, and he would lie awake, wondering if instead she went to Charlotte. But the house lay quiet, no boards creaking or doors whispering in the small hours. And in the day he would take himself abroad, upon the fells for hours,... saying he would not be back until a certain time,... to give them time, he thought, to be together however they might want to be,... without him.

They would look blankly at him, as if they did not understand. And on his return, there was never any sense of a change between them, not a hair out of place, not a flushed cheek, and Beatrice would touch his face in welcome, while Charlotte eased him from his coat and hung it in the hall. Then Beatrice would ask him if he had been up to the tarn that day, and had the tops been clear or fast in cloud? And Charlotte would twinkle at him as she made him tea, and bade him sit a while amid the scent of scones and bread, still rising from greased tins by the oven.

As far as they were concerned, he was not excluded - more like a welcome guest, and he was simply unsure of the part he played. But come evening, the women would once more let down their hair and resume their slow grooming, building up a charge whose mighty spark Matthew feared would one day leap across and strike him dead.

It was some months after the death of Joshua, when Drummaurdale no longer saw the sun, after the trees had turned to gold, and the first storms had stripped them bare, and the wood-smoke of Cragside lay stretched flat upon the valley all day long, that I walked out with Charlotte, the pair of us muffled in overcoats and our breath a pale mist around our heads. The tension had grown too much to bear and I was planning a brief return to the world beyond the valley, back to Manchester, to Ghita, and to Min. Only by so distancing myself, I thought, even for a short time, might I come to an understanding of what there remained for me, as a stranger, to do here.

"I've not spoken to Ellen McBride for months now," I said, lightly, "She could be a severe mistress - but I do miss her, you know?" I was trying to sound out the depths of this lady beside me, trying to detect an echo of Ms. McBride's steely presence, but it was Charlotte who coolly replied.

"She's gone, Matthew," she said. "She was no more than her job, her uniform. I'm none of those things. I'm Charlotte now."

"But who is Charlotte?"

"Sometimes I feel she could be the part of me I might have been if I'd not become so hopelessly contaminated by everything else. Does that sound odd?"

"Not at all. I used to have the same hopes for Joshua - except Joshua turned out to have been every bit as flawed as Matthew. He was no improvement."

"I'm not saying Charlotte's any better. It's just that I prefer her way of looking at the world. She's still a strong-headed person, but with a much gentler touch."

"The transformation in you is quite dramatic. And you are gentler."

"It's you I have to thank for it."

"No, Charlotte's been trying to get out of you for a long time. I just happened along and opened the door. But who would have believed it possible, that first

night we met, that we'd be here like this?"

"Don't. Don't speak of the outside world. I want to immerse myself in this place, with you,... and her."

She was most emphatic. Neither she nor Beatrice were happy with anything outside of the game now. It possessed them, but it had let me go. I felt myself floating away from them, and I was growing even a little curious about the way things were unfolding in the world outside. I'd had no newspaper, no television news for months and I could only guess how things were.

"Do you still include me in this?" I asked. "You know Joshua is dead. Matthew is a stranger here. It's Beatrice you are drawn to."

"It's true I am drawn to her - but we are in balance, we three,.. it would not be the same if you weren't here. Joshua, dead? Yes,.. I know. Even Beatrice doesn't speak his name now - but neither does she call you Matthew. Yet see how tenderly she treats you, how tenderly Charlotte thinks of you. There were three of us in the dream, remember?" She paused a while, then said: "Are you jealous of our,... friendship?"

"I don't think I am,... not jealous." I smiled, thinking to lighten the mood between us. "Beatrice no longer comes to me. I miss her."

"Well,... she doesn't come to me either. And I'd be afraid of coming to one of you, for fear of upsetting the other. I think perhaps we must endure the nights alone a little longer,... until at least,..."

"At least what?..."

She raised eyebrow. "Well, at least until we girls have worked out just who you are to us, Matthew Rowan. And what we are to do with you."

I laughed and drew comfort from the touch of her hand upon my arm. "You told me once that you despised Beatrice,... for her weakness," I said. "That you were afraid of becoming like her."

"That sounds like something Ellen McBride might have said, but not Charlotte. No, Charlotte loves her dearly."

"Yes, and Beatrice seems to be changing too - healing perhaps, don't you think? She smiles more, and her eyes twinkle when she's around you - with a kind of loving mischief."

"Yes."

"You know her better than me,... you knew her before,..."

"I won't say,... that's outside of the game, Matthew. Don't ask me."

"I know, I know,... I'm always thinking ahead too far. Forget I said anything,... but in the dream, when we sat up by the old chapel, I noticed a farm, south of here,..."

"It's not visible really, not in this reality. Here, it lies deeper in the valley. You

won't see it if you go up there again, but there is a farm - a good five miles from here. And a connection, yes,... but we must not speak of it."

"Beatrice was upset to see it."

"Beatrice does not know it."

"Then the woman who became Beatrice - she seemed to know it."

She raised her palm and placed her fingers gently to my lips, then shook her head: "This is Constable McBride's patch," she said. "Any crime around here, anyone hurt, and she would have visited. There would have been a connection - you understand?" She closed her eyes gently. "Don't ask me to explain any more," she whispered. "I want to lose Ellen completely. I fear she's coming back, the more we talk about it. Can we not just play the game, Matthew?"

"Yes,... yes of course,.. it's just that I feel I've been made to sit this round out. I seem no longer a player, but a spectator,... watching the pair of you."

"Is that so wrong? Might it not be that we can only be the way we are with each other, Beatrice and I, feel the way we feel, because we know that you are watching, and what we feel we feel because we see it reflected in your eyes?"

Her lip quivered and a tear fell. She wiped it impatiently, but then she remembered who she was, that she was Charlotte, and it was all right to feel this way. "I've never felt such love,... don't end it now, Matthew. Don't end the game,.. it must go on."

I caught her, folded her into me, and held her snug from the wind. Her cheek was cold against mine, and I could not bear to let her go until I'd felt it glow again, even if she had to drain every ounce of energy from me. "It's not for me to end anything," I said. "But Matthew needs to find his feet a little before he can go on."

"Don't leave us!"

"Only for a little while."

"No,... you can't,... I'd be afraid that she might come to me,... at night."

"There's no harm in it. Just be careful."

"You don't understand,... I'd be afraid of myself, not her,... what if she,..."

"She won't,..."

"But what if I *wanted* to?..."

"If the energy becomes sexual, my advice is to use the Practices in order to convert it, to protect yourself - that's what I've been doing. It's best not to turn it into a touching game, unless Beatrice decides that's what she wants."

She shuddered. "Even that would feel wrong. I'm confused, Matthew. When I'm with you I want to be a womanly kind of woman, and when I'm with her I want to be a manly kind of woman. What is it she possesses that draws me,

now?"

"She is innocent. And by being near her, we hope to learn how we can become innocent as well."

"Innocent?" she laughed. "Trust me, Charlotte's innocence is lost for ever."

"Innocence not the same as maidenhood. It can be regained."

"Innocence is gone, Matthew. What I feel is nostalgia for its loss,... and nostalgia is useless."

"No! Innocence is a state of not becoming tangled up in the world." I reached down and plucked a thistle-bob, small and clingy with its myriad little hooks, and I tossed it at her. It promptly clung to her, hanging on to the fibres of her coat.

"The thistle-bob is not innocent. It gets caught up in all manner of things that are of no importance, yet it cannot help itself. Its shape is barbed and sophisticated and the tangible world will carry it here and there, which is perfect, so long as the tangible world is where it is content to remain. But you and I are different. We want to transcend the tangible, and so we must lose our barbs, become innocent, then we can slip through the world, instead of becoming caught up in it. We can become innocent any time we choose."

"Then I promise I shall withdraw my barbs and not attach myself. And so must you. But why must you go?"

*Because I did not know who I was, because I had lost my balance, lost my innocence,... for how else could this mingling of the lavender and the rose set me so on edge? It was a yin on yin kind of alchemy, and I did not understand it.*

"I must speak with Ghita, but trust me Charlotte - I will come back."

## Chapter 48

## Returning to the world

I have not spoken very much about the world. For the purposes of this narrative it is far removed and mostly irrelevant, but I will speak of it now. It was November when I set out from Cragside. I took my leave at dawn one misty morning, quietly entering the rooms of Beatrice and Charlotte in order to kiss their sleeping forms, and breathe their scent deeply enough, I fancied, in order to sustain my ability to imagine them in the long days ahead. Then I climbed Drummaur Fell to the Sentinel stone, and set my course once more for a return into the world.

I left the Landrover in woods, so the women would not be stranded and could escape if they needed to. I had not considered how best to make my way without the car, and decided I should trust to fate, and simply walk. I reasoned I could easily make the M6 in a day, then hitch a ride into Manchester, even though I'd never done anything like that before. But this was not to be. In fact the nature of that journey was most unexpected and quite eventful.

The reason for my difficulties had its origin in a middle eastern conflict, born of an ill conceived land grab in the early years of the twentieth century. Then in more recent times, a pipe supplying oil across remote desert had been destroyed by holy bandits, and a long running, mindless little war had then prevented its speedy repair. In the weeks prior to my quitting Drummaurdale, the news media had whipped up an irrational panic concerning the implications of this war, which had emptied petrol stations overnight throughout the whole of Western Europe. Then a strike by merchant mariners had complicated matters and left the supertankers tied up in the docks, so new supplies of fuel had remained sluggish, and the petrol stations had been dry now for three weeks. The only vehicles on the road belonged to policemen who whizzed about with misplaced self-importance, along highways that were eerily bereft of motorists for policing.

On my way east, to the motorway, I occasionally walked through market-towns where people stood in throngs, as if not quite knowing what to do. There was a bemused air about them, as if without their petrol they suddenly found themselves useless. There seemed to be no imminent danger of anarchy, however: I was able to draw cash from holes in the wall, and credit cards still worked, but fresh food was very difficult to find. The towns had no bread, no milk and no eggs, for these things were generally replenished by petrol fuelled lorries. Tins and dry biscuits were also disappearing into domestic larders just as the last of the fuel had temporarily disappeared into domestic fuel tanks.

My mobile telephone was flat of course, not having been touched or even thought of in months, and I had no means of charging it up. Nor were there

such things as public telephones any more, so I could not ring Ghita to ask her what conditions were like in the city. I reached the M6 at dusk, and camped rough beneath a hedgerow, eating for my supper a boiled egg I'd purchased for a fiver from a shamelessly opportunistic farmer, whom I was, by that time, tempted to hope would rot in hell.

It was unsettling to find the world in such a state, though it had come close to this a few times in recent years of course, so I should not have been surprised. Supplies would be restored and things would get back to normal, eventually - it was simply the nature of the world nowadays. The intellectuals would have called it the post-something or other period of western history - post oil, I supposed, but I was shaken by it all the same and wondered if I should not return to Beatrice and Charlotte, fearful of unrest perhaps spilling into Drummaurdale, with hoards of hungry egos plundering the larders of the weak. But of course Drummaurdale was a secret place, and the women were quite safe there.

I spent a sleepless night, simply resting now and then but was driven to press on every few hours or so by the cold seeping into my bones. Dawn found me negotiating a barbed wire fence, and coming down an embankment, onto the hard-shoulder of the M6. There, I stood a while, marvelling at the post-apocalyptic silence and the emptiness of the eight lanes, across which rabbits were now brazenly hopping. Here and there vehicles lay abandoned, having run out of fuel.

I managed to walk another five miles, before a flashing light disturbed the peace and a brutish four by four cut urgently in front of me, as if it thought if I might possess the superhuman ability to outrun it. I was then given a sarcastic telling off, by a burly, broken-nosed policeman, for trespassing on the motorway.

I took this in with all the equanimity I could muster, and promised I would find another way to Manchester. Suitably mollified, the bruiser climbed back into his vehicle and it was then I noted that besides the usual collection of handcuffs, mace-spray, electronic zapper-gun and notebook in his belt, he also carried an automatic pistol in a holster. I was puzzled by that, and wondered if I had really been out of the world so long that English policemen now routinely carried guns.

"Are you armed?" I asked him, astonished.

"For the time being," he replied. "There's a serious public order situation, if you hadn't noticed."

"But things seem calm," I said. "Indeed, they seem deliciously tranquil, don't you think?"

Obviously he did not agree and took exception to my flowery language, born of too much romance, too much time with only my deepest self and the deepest selves of others for company. "Things could boil over any minute," he

warned.

"And you'll restore calm then by what,... shooting people?"

He eyed me severely and was perhaps thinking of some means of punishment, but he was a traffic copper and was used to doling out fines and licence points for motoring violations,... and I was walking, which clearly confused him. I could see the confusion in him, like a cloud of bees hanging around his head,.... he needed to have me for something, anything, but what? Eccentricity? An enquiring tone? Impertinence? Meanwhile I wondered where those policemen of my childhood had gone, with their shiny buttoned tunics and their pointy helmets and their trustworthy air.

Then a second vehicle crawled up slowly from behind, another monstrous four by four, this time a sinister black colour with shaded windows. The rear passenger window slid down, and a figure spoke in an authoritative tone: "It's all right officer. This gentleman's with me."

It was Planer. He opened the door and motioned for me to join him.

"I think I'd rather your colleague here shot me, in order to keep the peace," I said.

"Don't be ridiculous Rowan. Do you really intend walking all the way? Since I'm following you I might as well speed things up and offer you a lift. Simpler all round, wouldn't you say?"

"How do you know where I'm going?"

"Rowan, you have a very small life, restricted either to the suburbs of Manchester, or an empty valley in Westmorland. Your movements are not that hard to predict. If only all my targets we so obliging."

I climbed into the hushed interior of the latter day Black Maria, perfectly aware that it was into such conveyances, in a growing number of formerly benign western democracies, that citizens were disappearing into indefinite incarceration on the flimsiest of evidence. The chauffeur, a suited man with a conspicuous earpiece, pulled the car out into the empty highway and floored the throttle, so that I was punched back into the seat.

"I thought fuel was short," I gasped.

The interior was all black leather and chrome and it had a dry, air-conditioned atmosphere, like I imagined the inside of an alien spaceship. "You could run my car for a week on what this thing burns in an hour."

"Fuel's only short for the likes of you," he replied, with a touch of cynical humour.

"Of course. So,.. where's your fancy dress? The last time I saw you, you looked like,..."

"What? Like you?... I must admit, I found it difficult to stay in character. You dealt with Thaddeus I noted,... though lowering your head to the barrel of his

gun was not exactly what I would have advised."

"It worked though didn't it? Why can't you see my way is sometimes better than yours?"

"Because by rights you should be dead."

"Part of me is. Where is Thaddeus, now? Is he all right?"

"Do you care? Don't answer that - of course you care. Still, he won't be troubling anyone for a while - a nasty accident like that."

"All is well then."

"It would seem so, for now."

"Thaddeus won't return to the Drummaur Valley?"

"I doubt it,... but you harbour a more serious threat there now."

"What? Oh,... you mean Charlotte? I don't think so."

"Charlotte? Ah, is that what Ms McBride is calling herself these days? Dangerous woman that. Be warned."

"I would say she's simply been misplaced for most of her life. Now that she's free of your kind, she can perhaps find herself."

"My kind? You really have a dim view of authority, Mr Rowan."

"Not at all, Inspector. I was referring more to your metaphorical role as my ego,... except now I see you more as the collective ego of mankind. The writer of rules, the keeper of the masks we wear, the choreographer of our personas, the unseen architect of all our fears."

"Really! Your capacity for imagination never ceases to amaze me. Curious, though - I was trawling the police records and found mention of an incident in that valley, back in 1900, a crime of passion,... victim's name was Beatrice, murdered by a besotted admirer, her husband's brother, a man by the name of Thaddeus - he hung for it, you know? It's all documented. The husband's name was Joshua - married his mistress - name of Charlotte. Had a child with her,... name of,... "

"Stop! Joshua had a child with Charlotte?"

"Yes,... funny little twist, that. What's the matter? Does it not fit your version of the story?"

The news disorientated me, which was good. There is always a danger of creating fixed ideas about how things are, then clinging to them. I had begun to formulate the past, however loosely, but this disturbed the neatness of things, kept them fluid, kept them unstructured.

I was staggered: it was true, a version of this story really did take place here!

"There are so many versions now, Inspector. I sense the perfect permutation

has yet to be conceived. Is history fixed, or is it fluid? Is it like the future? Can it be changed? I really don't know, but I suspect anything's possible."

Planer rolled his eyes. "History is what was written down as a record of the past, and the future is whatever we choose to make it."

"Naturally I would expect you to say that, and I'm grateful, if only because it reminds me how much my position has changed. You might also say we move into the future and further away from what has passed, but that's just a convenient way of viewing things, like the way we tend to think of the world as being flat, even though we know it's actually round. One could just as easily say we exist in the present moment and that we are surrounded by layers of both past and future, and that since the present moment is of such an infinitesimally small duration, you might also say that nothing is as it appears, that what we see before us is an illusion, and that it can all be changed, if we are sympathetic enough to what is meant to be, or what is trying to come through."

"You're floating away from me now, Rowan, riding up in that balloon of hot air. I think I'll just cut the string and let you rise until you burst. And you will burst. Sooner or later, you'll come down to earth, come crawling back to me, acknowledging me as the only reality there is. Then you'll admit your sins and be grateful for it."

Manchester loomed dark and threatening through the smoked glass of the Black Maria. Without a word I was chauffeured directly to O'Doire's front door which was both convenient and yet also disturbing, that Ego knew my moves so well, and could second guess my thoughts.

"You were going to tell me the name of the child," I said.

"There is no child, Mr Rowan. The woman who calls herself Beatrice is not pregnant you know."

"You said there was a child."

"A long time ago."

"A moment ago."

"Over a century ago, Mr Rowan. That time is not relevant to this."

"In linear terms, maybe, but in circular time things cut back to their centre, and what was centuries ago, was also only a moment ago. Both past and future are all around us, Inspector, they each have the potential for informing the other. Now, what was the name of the child?"

Planer pressed a button and the door beside me slid open. "Goodbye Mr Rowan."

He was not going to tell me. I stepped out, feeling oddly disconnected from the Manchester I had once known.

"You'll find you already know it," he said.

It was as much as he was going to say, so I got out. Then the door slid shut, and the Black Maria purred away. But the windows of the street had eyes, and every one of them belonged to Planer, so I felt I was still watched. It was fortunate then, every single one of those eyes was blind to the real world, to the world as I had begun to see it.

* * * * *

# Book 6

## The Book of Counsels

***Write down the advice of he who loves you, though you like it not at present.***

***English Proverb***

******

## Chapter 49

## The Counsel of Min

Min looked up from her desk in the secret attic room of O'Doire's Antiquarian Bookshop and she gazed at me as if she had predicted my return, but not quite dared to believe in it. There was an initial surprise and she was clearly touched, but this did not give way to a welcome embrace. Instead she sat back and regarded me objectively with a placid smile. She looked different, a little older perhaps, a little more mature. Could it be that our parting had deepened her? Could it be that it had deepened us?

"Matt! You look like you slept under a hedge!"

"As a matter of fact, I did."

She was another of my strange archetypes, this woman, I thought - part cheeky minx, part possessor of a knowledge that most of us were now far too immature to understand - the beauty and the purity, and the joy of our sexuality.

"Something's happened to you," she observed. "It's in your face - the way you move. And your hair is greyer, almost white at the temples, like you've seen a ghost. Sit. Sit. Tell me."

"I will tell you - but later."

As I sat, I realised I just wanted to look at her. She did not object. She belonged to this world of senses, of sensuality, and was its most accomplished ambassador. Everything for Min came through the senses - touch, taste, sight, sound, smell, and something else, something we had forgotten. It was good to be back in this world for a while.

"You've not come to make a housewife out of me, I hope?" she said.

"You hope? Min, I'm crestfallen."

"It's just that I'm seeing someone else at the moment. Coffee?"

"Coffee, yes please. You've been seeing someone for as long as I've known you, but its never stopped you from propositioning me before."

"I know. But this is different, and interesting, and I'd be sorry to let it go just now."

"It sounds very special,... not too dangerous I hope,... or painful?"

She grinned. "Not this time. This time it's very, very gentle."

"I'm relieved to hear it. And pleased,... for you."

"I'd put it all on hold though, if you'd only ask me. You know I would."

How I loved Min! I loved her sweetness, and her naughtiness. I loved the dimple in her chin, the glittering stud in her nose, and the other oft-imagined piercings. I loved her in shiny black leather, and I loved her in the knowledge

that she would look as smoulderingly lovely in a bin-liner, staring out with those knowing eyes, eyes possessed of a certain knowledge and a breathtaking experience of the erotic.

"Yes," I said. "You'd do it for the experience, for what it would teach you. You'd shag my brains out for a year, maybe longer, or maybe shag me between shagging someone else, half my age and of a more unusual persuasion, and you would hope that we could still be friends when it was time to stop - when we were all shagged out, so to speak. And really I would try, but I'm a simple kind of guy, a clingy kind of guy, and I would love you so,... and it would break my heart if, once having shagged you I could not shag you any more. We've talked of this before, Min, I think."

She fanned herself with an envelope. "Yes, but never so eloquently, not without a lot of blushing on your part, and certainly not in so many dirty words. You really have changed, Matt."

"I suppose I have."

"It's good. I like this in you. I also love the word shag. It has just the right amount of tingle to it - something not quite smooth. Yes that's it - a rough and tingly word,... like a ribbed condom - better than fuck. That has such a dead, dull ring to it, like a cracked old vase, and it feels like a squishy banana. I'd much rather be shagged than fucked. Is it me or has it grown hot in here."

"Heat follows you around, Min. Heat and sex are where you are. And for the moment that's why I'm here too. That's why I've come back: I need your help in understanding something. You're the only person I know who understands sex with anything approaching a grown up attitude."

She gave a nervous laugh which sounded strange for she was rarely rattled. "This is unusual," she said. "Normally I'm the one with the whip, making you dance. I feel myself growing very wet in anticipation all of a sudden."

"Then perhaps I should add that I'm looking for counsel, not a practical demonstration."

"That's just typical of you! You walk unexpectedly into the middle of my dull morning, get me all excited - then say stop! I don't think so. Make me dance some more! Oh Matt, the book trade has been *so* tedious since you left it."

"I dare say the book trade will survive without me."

"But it doesn't want to just survive. It wants to spread its wings and fly, it wants to be,... oooh, it want to be shagged."

She was gushing, bubbling over suddenly and I had to calm her, cool her down or I'd get no sense out of her, just more of this delightfully, deliciously dangerous flirting. "How are you managing to get into the city without fuel?"

She was deflated at once. "Oh Matt, really!" She sighed. "The trains are still running - it's not quite total chaos yet. Do you need somewhere to stay?"

"Just for tonight."

"Then you must come home with me."

"On certain conditions."

"I won't touch you. I won't tease you. We shall be like an old married couple, sleep in separate rooms and ignore each other all evening. How does that sound?"

"More familiar than you might think."

"Oh, Matt,..."

There was a deep and genuine sympathy in her eyes and in her voice. This woman did care for me, the tangible me, or rather the tatters that remained, the bits that had not been sucked into the void of the intangible and the esoteric.

"Will she not mind?" I asked.

"She?"

"The woman you're seeing, the woman you're with. Will she not mind you bringing an old boyfriend home?"

"How do you know it's a woman I'm seeing?"

In truth, I'd said it before I'd thought about it, which is so often the way with such unexplained glimpses.

"It can't be any other way right now," I replied. "It seems to be a condition of the times - and it's also at the heart of what I hoped you might be able to help me understand."

"What? How I can swing both ways? But you've always known that about me, surely."

"I guess I've always know it, yes. But what I mean is the image: why does the image of it haunt me? Two women in love,... with each other. More than haunt me: make me feel weak with knotted desire."

"Are you serious?"

I nodded.

"It haunts all men, if they'll admit to it." She spun her chair to face the shelves behind her and took out a book which she then opened and spun round to face me. An artful image of entangled lingerie grew slowly into focus. It was a pair of pale females performing mutual cunnilingus, tense fingers knotted in each other's hair as if to drive the pace of their coupling.

"See?" she said.

"All right, I know this arouses me: You don't need to prove it. The question is why does it arouse me?"

"Because you want to convert these honeys back, straighten them out, make them want men again. Make them want you. You see them like this and they turn you on, but you have a sense of power over them. You may even feel protective towards them because your ego would have you believe you are superior, that they can only really be satisfied after you've sunk your squishy banana into both of them, gone deeper into them than they can go themselves with their skinny little fingers."

"No, that won't do. Men are not so simple as that. There's more to it. Much more. And anyway, if you turn the page I'm sure you'll find ladies wearing false male sexes - all artfully designed of course, and capable of filling a woman up quite nicely I would imagine. No, the man is redundant in this coupling and they have no interest in him, no need for him, physically. I understand that, but it still haunts me."

She looked almost longingly at the picture while tracing her finger along the outline of a slender thigh. "Arousal is a biological thing, Matthew, and I'm afraid the boring scientific studies show that men really are much simpler than women. Heterosexual men are aroused by images of two women pleasuring each other - more-so even than images of a man and a woman pleasuring each other. It's simply in the nature of men, and that's why it haunts you. It's not a mystery, you'll find no handle on the meaning of life by contemplating it, and it doesn't make you strange, either. Just horny."

"But women aren't aroused by images of homosexual men,... erm,... coupling."

"Aren't they? What makes you so sure?"

"Are you?"

"It depends. To a woman it's not so much the nature of the act that's important, as the erotic charge, and that can be present in the most unexpected of things. Yes, we can be aroused by pictures of men pleasuring men, or women pleasuring women, or men pleasuring women. It does not automatically make us lesbian or bisexual,... just women."

"Except you are bisexual."

"Apparently, yes, though you know how much I hate labels. The same applies to straight women, to all women."

"Then are all women potentially bisexual then?"

"You are being deliberately gauche now, Matthew."

"I'm sorry - I do have a reason for asking."

"Very well, I believe all women are capable of feeling a profound love for other women, yes. Whether they are capable of intimately touching other women without embarrassment is a different matter - such things are forbidden by the taboos of society, the unspoken, unwritten rules about what constitutes so called normal sexual practice.

"And if you really want to know, the same thing applies to men. As deeply as this might shock you, Matthew, you are capable of loving another man as much as you might love any woman, but you deny this part of yourself because you are conditioned by society into seeing only one way of expressing love - by sex."

"Conditioned?"

"If love could be expressed in other ways that required no orgasm, you'd understand what I mean."

"But as humans it's natural for us to want to express love though sex!"

"Of course, and so we are the way we are. But why this sudden interest, Matthew? You worry me. We need to find you a nice, straight lady, I think. A Laura Ashley lady. That would be best for you - no more of this thinking about lesbians. It's not good for you."

I was feeling my weariness now. I dropped my head into my hands, and massaged my burning eyeballs. "The thought of a simple relationship sounds very appealing right now, Min, but I'm probably not in the best frame of mind for any kind of company. In fact I think I'm probably going insane."

"Not you Matthew. Such stillness doesn't come from a mind in torment. Your mind is still, like clear water,.. and what's freaking you out is the realisation of what lies underneath,... underneath all of us. I can only imagine what you've seen. And I can only hope that one day you might show me how to see it too. But I'm fascinated: who are these women,... these women haunting you?"

"Let's say they are two women of my acquaintance, both my former lovers in an indirect sort of way, and who each know the other is a former lover of mine. They are tolerant of this. After they chanced to meet, they began to derive pleasure and an unexpected comfort from each other's company, following a strange dream experience. They embrace, they groom each other,... they are drawn together because they sense in each other a source of selfless love,... and I am equally drawn to both of them, because of the love I sense, a love I desperately want to share. But the sexual potential seems shifted away from me, and now resides between them."

"In what way is it sexual, describe it to me? Describe their relationship? They comb each other's hair? Is that it? How do you feel when you see them together, grooming, embracing like that."

"I want to protect them, but that's not because I feel superior or stronger, indeed one is far stronger than me. It's just that they seem so very beautiful together."

"But do you not want to shag them?"

"No. Plain old sex would be an abuse. But it does arouse me and that's what I want to overcome, otherwise I'm going to have a hard time being with them. And I *have* to be with them. In a peculiar way they are my women and I am

their man,... but I can't explain it any more than that."

"You want them to become your daughters then?"

"That's interesting, but they're a little old for that. They're becoming sisters perhaps?"

"And you would be their brother,... or their sister too?"

"Ah that strikes a chord,... now we're getting somewhere. Min,... I knew I could rely on you to tease this out of me. I want to be their sister,... but how can I be their sister and remain a man?"

"Do you want to remain a man?"

"Yes, yes,... when I'm with you I want to be a man,... and with them as well, at least on the outside,.. but on the inside,..."

She nodded, long, slow nods. "You know that all inexplicable attraction is a case of projection, Matthew."

"And I must take it back inside, I know. It's just, watching them as I have been doing, it's like when you stroke a cat's fur for long enough, you start to feel the air crackling under your palm. When I'm with them, the whole room crackles in the same way."

She began to fan herself again. "I'd no idea," she said, "I mean this secret life you've led, away from here,... from me."

"You don't know the half of it, Min, but I will tell you everything, one day. You could perhaps write a book about me."

"Only if you let me change the ending so I can become your lover."

"Really, Min,... "

"All right,.... listen, the situation you describe is not really about sex. It has nothing to do with Eros. I've never come across anything like it, but it sounds to me like alchemy. There is a mythical dimension to it. This is a psychological process between the three of you, and very strange indeed. It's moved beyond the physical world - that's what I see in your eyes."

"But in alchemy as I understand it male and female elements conjoin and by a long process of strange interactions, there is eventually born a new breed of being. But here, female and female conjoin, a scent of lavender and a scent of rose."

"That's interesting. Lavender is cool and earthy and Yin - while rose is warm and Yang. Their combined scent is,... what?"

I shook my head. "A powerful brew," I said. "I'm afraid of the outcome. I need to remain unmoved, at least in my trousers. Or I can never come close to what I think is their potential."

She seemed at a loss: "Keep me company Matthew. Come home with me this

evening and meet my lover. Maybe seeing us together will answer some of these questions for you."

The train pulled out of Oxford Road, groaning under the strain of extra carriages and commuters. It was standing room only as the city infrastructure struggled to maintain its semblance of business as usual. But the newspaper stands bore no hope of a swift end to the crisis. On the contrary, there were more hints of trouble to come: power-cuts and fuel bandits ramraiding the stockaded filling stations, where local authorities had sequestered their emergency reserves. I observed a world that was falling - and I found I did not care. Were it not for the people dear to me who inhabited it: Min, Ghita, Beatrice, Charlotte and, somewhere in its seething madness, Aaron,... I could easily have felt myself detached.

I was pressed close to Min, this smouldering coal of a woman, though at the same time I noticed her eyeing up the multi-buckled and heavily studded physique of a glowering male Goth who was hanging from the rail, opposite. He had tight trousers ripped in such a way as to be barely holding together, and he sported a prominent bulge in the groin department of which he seemed quite justifiably proud.

"Prince Albert," she whispered.

"What?"

She smiled. "A big ring piercing the end of his dick. I can always tell."

The thought of such a thing seemed horrific to me. "Do you take it out before,... you know,..."

"What? Don't be silly, it would spoil all the fun!"

I could not swim these depths in her, these promiscuous depths, where sex was a game without rules, where the conventions seemed entirely at odds with the ones my parents would have understood. But I did love her.

Home was an end-terraced cottage in a village twenty miles outside the city. It had a pub and a Chinese takeaway, but no longer any sense of community. Houses were isolated citadels and people did not know each other. The little side-road was unmade, but not from newness, more from its antiquity and its continuing neglect, but the house was warm - warm colours and soft fabrics, and it was very, very feminine. But of course this was not Min's house.

Kylie was a pretty little red-headed woman, in her late twenties. She wore Laura Ashley prints and frills and a sported a perm that seemed a couple of decades out of fashion, but was perhaps due for a revival. She also had an uncomplicated smile and was, Min told me, an uncomplicated lesbian lady who had never doubted her persuasion. At Min's urging, she bore a piecing through her left nipple that had made her faint, and now carried there a jewelled ring that Min had bought her as a token of her love. She also washed and ironed and watched Coronation Street, like any other woman, but just preferred, in an uncomplicated way, to hold and be held by other women.

"Matt's curious about lesbians," said Min, no sooner than we had crossed the threshold and I had bashfully pressed Kylie's little hand. Kylie raised an eyebrow in query. "So he can understand and transcend the lust it arouses in him," added Min.

"Min's sometimes very naughty," said Kylie, with a disapproving glance at her lover. "As I'm sure you already know."

"Yes,... she can be, though she's a dear friend. It's a pleasure to meet you, Kylie."

"And you, Matthew. She talks about you a lot, has all sorts of strange fantasies about you."

"That's because I look and dress like her father."

"Yes,... so I see. But she tells me you dress that way in self defence and who can blame you with this little madam on the loose? Don't worry, I'll lock her in with me tonight. As for me, you're quite safe,... no disrespect but I don't fancy you at all."

"The story of my life."

"I don't believe that."

"I apologise for blushing."

"You're very sweet, and very welcome."

Why was I there? It was as Min had suggested: so I could observe them. Their relationship was obviously intimate in the sense of something new and as yet largely unexplored. It was thus still a tactile relationship - touching, squeezing and stroking - when they met, when they passed, and when they sat together. This was a kind of making love, but unconsciously done, as they literally could not keep their hands off each other. The most striking scene between them was a private one, one I did not intend observing, but caught accidentally through a half closed door, later that evening. Min was leaning back against the kitchen counter and Kylie was pressed against her, between Min's shiny leather clad legs, their mounds fastened tightly together, their eyes locked and oblivious to the world, Min's thumb lightly stroking Kylie's breast, searching for the nipple and the jewelled ring.

Of course the effect on me was immediate and explosive, but I saw the difference at once, and felt it. The atmosphere was highly charged and intensely erotic, and though these women were no doubt deeply fond of each other, their relationship was founded on a mutual craving for sexual pleasure. This was human sexual love, a deep attraction and a trust. We made ourselves vulnerable to someone, and trusted them to touch that which was most intimate in human life: the desire to be brought to orgasm by another person.

On the other hand, what took place at Cragside between Beatrice and Charlotte was, as Min had suggested, something else entirely. It had a dream-like quality that was the continuation of something inside my head, the

continuation of a power leaking into the manifest world through the portal that was the Drummaur valley. She was right - it was alchemy. Beatrice and Charlotte and me. We all three had become lovers of a different kind altogether.

I paused a while longer than I ought, observing Min and Kylie. I could easily have consumed the sexual energy by the technique I have already described to you,.. but would that have been correct? I felt not,... the energy was theirs and I deserved not one piece of it, even in self defence,... so I crept away painfully erect and aching for a straight forward release.

I slept fitfully that night, and remained intensely aroused for the most part of it, for they were not quiet lovers, and in the morning I was glad to take my leave of them: I was middle aged and quite incapable of burning off that amount of lust by any of the means available to me.

"You will write Min? You promised to before but never did."

"I know. I will write, I promise."

"Kylie's a good woman. It makes me happy knowing you're with someone like her."

"That's only because if you were a woman, you'd be like Kylie. A little out of date, but sweet and gentle. And since I can't have you, I might as well have her. And if I wasn't with her and she was straight - she'd be the woman I'd want to see with you - that is if you wouldn't be with me."

"I see,... I think. Anyway,... stick with her, Min."

"It's unlikely, Matt. As you said all relationships shag themselves out sooner or later."

"That's not what I meant, and it's a very depressing way of looking at things. If you want to be with one person you've got to try looking beyond the shagging. It is possible, you know?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Look, I know I can't teach you anything about sex, but really it's something else that keeps us together."

"Well, when you find it, come tell me what it is and we can use it on each other."

When she kissed me, I closed my eyes. I felt her warmth and her heat, and tried to imagine her as my woman. It was a good fit, except for all the reasons I was only too familiar with, plus sooner or later I'm sure she would have made it a test of my fealty, to endure a Prince Albert - which I'm afraid was completely out of the question.

I took the train to an unmanned railway platform within a day's hike of the only place I knew I would find peace. The world can be a lonely place for pilgrims such as I, and it is always a comfort to be with others who see things

in a similar sort of way.

## Chapter 50

## The Counsel of Khan

I shall call the town Boxley, simply for convenience. It is a small market-town, undergoing a slow process of self destruction, turning itself inside out - shops transforming themselves into megamarts which slowly leak away to the newly concretised rural hinterland, and which then sucks drop-in centres and frail charity shops into the wake of their passing. It was a dead place that morning - no vehicles of course and there had also been a power-cut rendering useless all the shops and services that remained, so people hung about in groups, like spectators viewing the unfamiliar ruins of their civilisation. There were more youths here than there had been in the Lakes. There was an early evening feel, a time when our towns are abandoned to prospective revellers engaged in heated exchanges of dull expletives and finger jabbing. They wore the uniforms of media dictated fashion, so the nonconformists might more easily be spotted and preyed upon.

I was given the glowering eye by numerous tribes of children who had territorialised the street corners, but my tweeds and my greyness, and my general air of other-worldliness must have been hard to read as any sort of challenge to their primitive egos. How strange it is, we adults seem to live in such fear of our feral prodigy!

They allowed me to pass unmolested, and I was out of the town's environs very quickly, picking up the dog-fouled fledgling paths that began around the broken backs of long abandoned factories. From there I was led out into the quiet of the countryside. The fields immediately surrounding the town bore notices that spoke of imminent development - houses, retail outlets and leisure complexes, for these places were no longer any use for growing food. The farms of my childhood that had once harvested wheat and reared cattle now stored caravans and offered "extreme adventure activities" like paintballing and Motor-cross. These days our food came many thousands of miles, from farms in Canada and Eastern Europe - at least I hoped it would when the fuel began to flow again, and things got back to normal.

The common lands were hard to find, more still the last fragments of ancient forest, where the paths were not fractured into useless shards, but strolled on for miles with purpose and dignity. The Retreat could not hope to remain untouched for long, I thought. The world would encroach soon enough and its detritus would wash up against the walls to leave a line of scum. But not yet. Not yet!

It was unfortunate that so little of our forests remained, forests that might have taken several hours to cross on foot. We had cleared them long ago in the scramble for wood to build houses and ships, and to fire the furnaces of our early industries - all gone, now. These days only the barest scraps of

woodland remained, and they were places people feared to go after dark, feared ancient spirits now transformed into the muggers and rapists and axe wielding psychopaths that our media culture assure us are a rampant evil.

Thus the forest that was home to The Retreat was rare, and unfrequented - not ancient, but privately planted in the seventeenth century, and though not covering a vast area, it was striking, and unusual, taking one in at its fringes, and swallowing one deep into its silence and wood-scented shade.

It was Khan who met me on the forest path, long before I'd reached the gate to the inner grounds. He appeared in his monkish habit, smiling, serene, and welcoming. "Matthew! You were in my dreams recently. I had a feeling we'd be seeing you."

"Brother Khan."

"Tell me, how are things in the outside world?"

"You haven't heard? There's been no fuel for three weeks now. Now there are power-cuts. But things seem calm for the time being."

"I was unaware," he said, though he seemed unmoved by my news: "You expect there to be disorder?"

"In the cities possibly, if it goes on for much longer,... then the towns will follow,... Something tells me the authorities will be heavy handed,... that they'll draw first blood. The policemen seem to be carrying guns routinely now."

"Ah,... do they? Like my own country, then. People with guns do provoke the worst in others, and themselves, whether they are policemen or not, don't you think? They are the omens of ill fortune. You look tired, let me walk with you."

"I've not slept much - the friends I stayed with were rather noisy last night. I'm glad to be here. But I've been thinking: have you made contingencies for the Retreat, I mean if there were to be unrest?"

He gave a shrug. "You know we are self-sufficient. We do not need the outside world, except in cases of serious illness or injury. In many ways we have taken the house back in time to the fifteenth century. It draws no power but what we generate ourselves. We shall get by well enough, I trust."

"It just doesn't seem remote enough to be safe now. I mean if things don't get back to normal."

"You fear the world will collapse upon us?"

"Not the whole world, just some of its less savoury characters I suppose."

Khan smiled. What horrors he must have witnessed in his life, more turbulent times than I could imagine, and all of this must have seemed quite tame to him. There was no answer. No action. No sense in worrying. "You're right of course," I said. "Forgive my immaturity."

He clapped me on the back. "Our little school gathers several disparate lineages, each of which goes back three thousand years, Matthew. We have survived many an apocalypse in that time. When the wind blows we bend with it. When the malevolent turn to look at us, they find we have become ghosts. When they try to scoop us up, we have become like water running through their fingers. We have no centre, no edge, no name, no substance. There is nothing to define our existence, and therefore since we do not exist, how can we be visited by harm?"

As I had walked towards the retreat, it seemed to me I had pushed its walls inwards, shrunk the sphere of its sanctuary, but Khan's words now pushed the walls back out, spread the sphere of sanctuary in such a way that the troubled world was lost in fog once more.

"You think I'm worrying unnecessarily?"

"We should never worry about the imaginary disasters that might overtake us, Matthew. If we do, we tie ourselves in with the probability of them happening. We grant them permission to overwhelm us. Yet if we briefly acknowledge the possibility, and then dismiss it, we become invisible to it."

"Be careful what you wish for, and what you don't?"

"Ha! Exactly."

"You know, when this is over for me, there is nothing I would value more than to stay here, if you would accept me back."

"You have never left us, Matthew, and you are always welcome, but you know your work is in the world, as is Sister Ghita's."

He watched me carefully as he spoke her name.

"I have seen Ghita recently, I think."

"Your paths are inextricably bound, Brother Matthew."

"Tell me, was my infatuation with her a cause of much concern?"

He gave a jolly laugh. "Ghita is a very beautiful woman. It is her fate that all who come to her shall fall in love with her. She deals with this in her own way, with love, with kindness,... and meanwhile prays for old age and wrinkles. It concerned me that you might not escape, and certainly it held you back when you were with us before, but now I see you are free of hope in that respect."

"Free of hope?"

"That you and she might ever share an ordinary life."

"Well that's for sure. I understand that's not *her* fate."

"Nor is it yours. I think you understand that also, now."

"I pray you're wrong, but I expect you're right. Nothing would suit me more

than to find a nice little house somewhere,... and a nice woman, close the door, and watch T.V."

The sound of his laugher rang through the forest again. "On the contrary, Matthew, nothing would suit you less."

"I thought we should embrace the simple things. What could be simpler than that?"

"We should seek to embrace nothing, Matthew, and only follow where we are led, embrace only that which seeks to embrace us. We are all instruments of our own fate, and it would seem yours is far from a simple one. But tell me, what brings you back from the world?"

"I wanted to pay my respects,.. and to see Ghita of course."

"Ghita is here, you'll find her in one of the forest clearings. She meditates for long periods these days, and teaches little, though she will see you of course."

"Is she all right?"

"Oh yes,... she glows with a rare energy, but I feel her path will take her from us soon, and I shall miss her. She has become a dear, dear friend."

As I digested this news, I did so in the knowledge that nothing Khan ever said was without purpose. He did not gossip idly, did not make small-talk.

"Take her? In what sense?"

He held out a hand to calm me. "In truth I do not know, but the Changes suggest to me the probability is high."

We drank tea in his study, the intricate song of a thrush coming through the open window. Within there was the scent of cinnamon. And it was here he showed me his copy of the Changes. This was a great honour and I was deeply touched by it. It dated from the middle ages, and was a priceless treasure, having been passed down from master to student, generation after generation. He handled it with cotton gloves and laid it out on a silk cloth for me to see. The script was unintelligible to me, being in Mandarin and it was strange to see it thus, for I had become familiar with the work over long years in my own language - its illustrative metaphors drawn from my own culture, while this one, I knew drew on the original metaphors from the warring states period of China's antiquity.

"I should be afraid to touch this, Khan. It's a wonder it's in such good condition."

"It was made to last," he said, admiringly.

"You know - I've studied this book,... spent decades trying to un-pick the riddle of it. We perform a ritual - toss some coins, deal some stalks or whatever, then look up the answers,... but these are purely random and yet the counsel is always accurate."

"Not always, Matthew. Sometimes, the sky is cloudy and the stars obscured. Then we are thrown back upon ourselves - and if we have any sense we meditate until we drift back into Tao. When we are in Tao, yes the answers are always accurate, and trustworthy, and yet, as you say, by all rational analysis, they are also completely, beautifully, perfectly random. But then is not randomness a fundamental property of the universe? At a fundamental level, at a sub-atomic level, we cannot rationally analyse the structure of things with the laws of your M.r Isaac Newton. At a fundamental level man must deal with randomness and probabilities. It is there also that the Changes have their roots. These are old lessons Matthew."

"Forgive me. It's just that a part of me has always wanted to understand the nature of things in terms that can be explained in words of one syllable. And I know what you're going to say - that any proper understanding cannot be put into something so simple as words at all, and that even the desire to understand gets in the way of ever understanding anyway."

He laughed. "Yes. I was going to remind you of that. But all the same, I think you will achieve your understanding in this lifetime. Even in your confusion, you do not realise how surely and how swiftly you drift towards it."

"I doubt that. But then I tell myself why bother trying to understand? The world appears to be going to hell, and we only pass this way once anyway, don't we? Why are we driven to try to understand? Is it just a fear of dying? Do we think that if we can understand the nature of life, we can somehow escape death?"

"Ah but Matthew, the world has always appeared to be going to hell, from any historical perspective you care to choose. As for passing this way once, it's always a possibility of course, but personally I am confident this is not the only life we have."

I looked at him closely. He was trying to teach me something new here: "You speak of Tao, you teach the Changes, but Taoism places no philosophical emphasis on reincarnation - I've never heard you speak of it before."

He held up a hand to calm me. "Your thoughts are running away, Matthew. There is a difference between philosophical and religious Taoism. I teach the philosophy - but also, my personal view of things has been shaped by the teachings of Buddhism. Ghita teaches also Taoist philosophy and a mixture of both Hindu and Buddhist ideas, while her approach to, shall we say, certain other practices is western and new-age - even though such practices also have roots in Buddhism and Taoism. But behind all of these things there is the perennial philosophy, the germ of an idea that has cropped up and caused men to wonder down the ages.

"In all your time with us you have never been encouraged to adhere rigidly to one set of beliefs, but always to question, to find your own way. Remember, we have no label, no name for what we teach, while recognising at the same time the wisdom of the many traditions that have preceded us. They are the

beautifully intricate tools that have been left to us - the aim, however, the work in hand, is simply to free the mind by whatever means possible. And in any case - I did not mention reincarnation - only that this is perhaps is not the only life we have - there is a difference, but that is for a later discussion. For now, you should meditate, before you set out to find Ghita."

## Chapter 51

## The loneliness of God

Ghita had not physically changed in the months since I'd last seen her, yet there was a difference in her that day. I found her in a clearing, in the forest, and I hesitated when I saw her, for she was drawn up into a meditative lotus, hands pressed lightly together, as if in prayer.

There came rods of sunlight, streaming down through the forest, painting her skin with flakes of gold. I could hardly believe in the reality of a scene that was so beautiful. It spoke to me more in the wordless language of the unconscious mind, it spoke to me in the most glowing terms, of triumph and of treasure. Her eyes were closed but in such a state as this her awareness reached out far beyond her physical senses, and of course she knew that I was there.

"So, Matthew. Do you no longer love me?"

"I shall always love you Ghita."

Still her eyes remained closed, and I could only speculate upon the form she now took, the form through which she perceived the being that was me. "But now you have accepted that you can float independently of me."

"Yes."

"Then we can both swim these waters, at times together, and at times alone. We are equals now. No longer pupil and teacher."

"I am still afraid to swim alone, Ghita, otherwise I would not have come. But it does seem as if I've been able to transcend an old way of thinking at last. I'm sorry I was so long in learning this lesson, sorry if I robbed you of your own energy, sorry if I held you back!"

She opened her eyes then, large and bright. I came closer and knelt upon the grass before her, our knees almost touching, and she held out her hands for me to take, which I did with great reverence, and a deep love for her.

"How much you have grown, Matthew."

She drew my hands to her, kissed them, then laid them against her soft breasts. "Desire me now?" she asked.

"You know that I do not. A friend of mine has been trying to unteach the lesson once drilled into me that sex is the only true expression of love between people."

"Then your friend is wise."

"I believe she is wiser than she knows."

"Such is the way of wisdom, Matthew. It rarely knows its own face.. You do seem different, my love."

"Cragside is forcing me to change, forcing me to accept all manner of strangeness."

"You have had a trying time. I understand. I shall help you if I can."

I began to falter, the memories of things catching up with me. "But Ghita are you real? You feel real, yet how can you be? Please tell me that you live and breathe! that you are not an hallucination."

"How real is this," she said, and then she placed the tips of her fingers on my forehead. They felt light and cool, but I also felt my forehead melting, her fingertips slipping through, like pebbles falling far through deep, deep water.

"It feels real," I said. "Deliciously cool and real."

"Good, you are reassured then. But having established the fact of our reality, what do you say we step aside from it for a while."

I seemed only to breathe and I was opening my eyes to sunlight. But we were no longer in the forest, in the heat of the afternoon. This was cool morning sunlight, dipping low into the Drummaur valley and I was looking at myself kneeling in the doorway of Cragside. Beatrice had already tumbled back into the hallway and Thaddeus was before me, the gun at his hip. Looking more closely, I saw the hammers had begun to fall. There was Charlotte just emerging from the trees, the first look of horrified realisation on her face as she saw what was happening, and I was flattered that she cared for me so much.

Things were not quite frozen though - they were moving, only slowly, and I was caught up once more in the events of that morning, but my perception existed outside of time, so I had as much time as I needed to observe things, an infinity of time if I so desired. I could feel the air moving on my face and the leaves were stirring. In the distance I could hear Drummaur Beck rumbling over the sill of rock, high up on the fellside.

Then I was beside myself, literally, having stepped out of my skin, and Ghita stood beside me, her arm in mine. I was delightfully aware of her silks upon my palm and the scent of her sandalwood.

"What am I looking at here?" I asked.

"A moment," she replied.

"But what's happening? Tell me, Ghita, why did I not die here?"

"In one version of this story you did. In another it was Beatrice. In another Charlotte came sooner and tried to wrestle the gun from Thaddeus, only to die in the process. There are many ways this moment plays out and all of them exist, Matthew. To understand this you must accept the possibility you are not really who you think you are."

"You mean Joshua?"

"You are Joshua, but then again Joshua is no more who you are than Matthew is. You might be an infinite number of selves, and if that is true then, in one version of this story you are sitting on a beach with Ingrid Bergman. It is the day before your wedding and you are blissfully contemplating the years of joy you have ahead of you."

"That sounds improbable, but if you're telling me it's true I'm inclined to believe it."

"I agree the probability of that version is rather slim, but it still forms a small, possibly irrelevant, part of who you are. In another version, you and I discovered a mutual attraction that was stronger than our individual desires to transcend all normal understanding of the world. We threw ourselves at each other, and are happily married with many children. That is a more probable reality, I think and one I like to explore from time to time. Still, more probable is the life that brought you to this moment: but remember, it is only a moment that forms part of a cluster of other probabilities. It is the peak of the curve, the most likely thing."

"But determined by what?"

"By your perceptions, my love. You decided the outcome here. You tipped the balance in favour of the course that later brought your footsteps back to me. You decided not to die."

"Joshua died here. And I did nothing. It was you. You tipped the balance, Ghita. I felt you. As the hammers fell, I caught your scent and the feel of you, just like now."

"I am not ready to let go of you, Matthew. From my point of view I tipped the balance into keeping you close. From your point of view I think you were also persuaded that, notwithstanding your other commitments in this place, Matthew and Ghita still had future business to attend to."

"This talk of probability is something I wasn't expecting - Khan also mentioned probabilities today. I was ready to believe I was a reincarnation of a past life, something persisting in time that hadn't found the right way of coming through yet. But this? You're saying this Matthew is part of an average of other Matthews that make up a sort of greater Matthew, a greater self?"

"Is that so very hard to believe? Forget the names we call ourselves - these are just convenient labels - we can have any number of them. It's possible to think of our real selves in terms of a probability wave."

"In time?"

"I'm inclined to forget about time. Time is only relevant in the manifest world, in a psychological sense. Here it has no meaning."

"I was afraid you would say that."

"In the transcendent realms there can be no such thing as time, my love. You know this."

"I know of the concept, but in order to make sense of things in reality, events have to follow in a certain sequence."

"Yes, we make sense of things that way. But just imagine if every event happened now, if everything that's ever happened in this valley is happening now, in the eternal now! Past and future are just tricks we play upon ourselves."

For a moment then, I was coming down the fell to Drummaur Tarn, to find Beatrice waiting in the stillness of early evening. It was ten years ago, or it was a hundred years ago, or two hundred, it was in my deepest past, in my most distant future. She had always been waiting like that. And I had always known it. The event was stored for convenience somewhere, but the experience of the moment I carried with me always, so that when it happened I was never surprised, always expecting, always comfortable, and always knowing.

But there was a paradox: "If the future's already happened, there's no sense in trying to do the right thing, Ghita. Free will is just another trick we play on ourselves and without it there's no point to our existence - yet everything else I've learned tells me there *is* a point, that in following this strange path, my life is all the better for it."

"What you say is true, but we should not think in terms of a specific future. Remember, all probabilities exist. What we cannot predict are those probabilities that we shall attract, the probabilities we shall transform into certainties. Granted, some probabilities become inescapable, like dates in our diary. These are fixed by a collective will and a power that is beyond our avoiding, but others are more flexible and open to persuasion,... like this one."

"Ghita, you know I trust you. You know I will believe anything you tell me, but you seem to be touching on a fundamental truth regarding the nature of existence, and I'm terrified by it."

She looked around, encouraging me to do the same. "How can any of this be, my love?"

"This valley? This time? What? I don't understand?"

"Don't you remember? A moment ago, we were in a clearing in a forest in the Cheshire countryside."

"That's surely different. That's our reality, while this is just a trick of our minds. A kind of dream, an hallucination."

"Is it? How sure are you of that?"

She picked up a pebble from the pathway and pressed it into my palm, then closed my fingers around it. "Does this not feel the way a pebble should? Does it not feel cool and smooth and damp and round. Yes, we create this,

you and I. But I ask again, how can it be?"

"I make it with my mind?"

"As you make all reality - with your mind. The property underpinning existence is consciousness. It is your universe - your experience is as you imagine it. How else could we leave one reality so easily and enter another? Why does this make you afraid, when you know in fact it makes you immortal?"

"Because I'm not sure I want to live for ever and be alone. And we are always alone, if reality is a thing of our own making."

She smiled and squeezed my arm. "Do you feel alone? Am I not with you? The waves of our probable lives intersect Matthew. When I say I have always known you, I mean that since meeting you my sense of purpose has multiplied. We are always seeking, always growing. And your life intersects the many lives of Beatrice, and Charlotte, and of this man, Thaddeus - though sadly he has a long way to go if this is episode illustrates the peak of his wisdom."

"He is my brother, I think."

"In one version, yes. In another just an angry man out for revenge for a wrong he committed in the first place."

"And in another probable version, I am not a man at all,... I am a woman. And these women are my sisters."

"Ah,... we are leaping ahead now. But you are correct. You understand, these are ideas that many will find disturbing."

"Myself included."

But what was most disturbing of all was the feeling of interconnectedness and that was strange, for all who have felt it claim to have been infinitely moved by the experience, as had I, once. But now I felt something else that took me full circle back to the darkest of my days, and while I had hoped for the existence of such a thing as the immortal spirit, the thought of my own immortality was suddenly repulsive.

There is a perennial philosophy regarding the nature of existence, a philosophy that runs outside of all the religious traditions, yet borrows shamelessly from them all, or they from it, depending upon your perspective. It is the philosophy of all the seers, all the shamans, and all the new age flakes like me and Ghita and Khan. And it tells us we are each a part of the same underlying pattern, each of us a twist of thought in the dream of a single mind, a consciousness that forms for us an illusion of matter, an illusion of solidity, in which to play out our probabilities, in which to toss the dice whose pattern-fall determines then the futures we might each attract.

But I could not grasp the purpose of such a mind, this godlike mind. For such a god, like all the gods we've ever dreamed, must, in its super-conscious

heaven, have been very, very,... lonely. And I did not want immortality if the god I was a part of was lonely.

I wanted the freedom, to turn myself off.

"Ghita,... all of this. All the drama of our lives, and the life of everyone who has ever lived,... whatever is the point of it? I've spent my whole life trying to understand, trying to see the meaning of it. I know there is no meaning in the physical world, as most of us see it. I agree, it is in some ways an illusion. There is more within us, I know, but the more I have uncovered, the more I need to ask the same question: What is the point? What does it want? What is it looking for through us?"

"What are any of us looking for, Matthew?" She held me then, enfolded me in sandalwood and silks. "Do you feel it, now, my love?"

Sometimes, when we are children, we fall in love. A boy will suddenly recognise something in a girl, a thing that fills him with a simple delight more precious than all his toys, and his adventures, yet he has no knowledge of sex, nor even the curiosity to want to see what is under the girl's skirt. He wants only to be a little boy, to see, and to share this feeling with that little girl.

Later in his life, he will experience love again, but with it will come the biological urgency of sex, the evolutionary urge to pass on his genetic material to another generation, and for all his life thereafter, he will search in vain for the feeling of that earlier boyhood love.

I felt it now.

Ghita laid her head upon my shoulder while I swam in the warmth and the glory of it.

"I do not understand any more than you, Matthew. But I believe when we succeed in finding this feeling, God feels it too, and is pleased. And if logic can be said to apply in this place, then what pleases God is surely also an indication of our purpose, and God's own. And the purpose is simply to encounter and express love by whatever means we can. And we can only really know and express such a love, if we are innocent."

## Chapter 52

## The Counsel of Beatrice

The scene was cleared, so to speak. Ghita and I stood alone, all the other players removed to their other probabilities, and I experienced the rare pleasure of being at Cragside with her. What did I do? I showed her around the house like an excited little boy. I showed her the antique kitchen, and explained how the clock kept its own time, showed her my pocket watch, and how, by sharing the clock's time, it was my link to this place. Then I showed her upstairs, to the blue room which was my own, and then, standing upon the threshold of Beatrice's room, we peered inside. She too felt the reverence of the place and declined to enter.

She smiled and breathed into my ear: "It is very lovely, Matthew, and that scent....?"

"Lavender," I said. "Now here. This is a pretty room,... Charlotte's."

Ghita breathed the air.

"Rose," I said.

We were descending the stairs when I heard footsteps coming from the parlour, a woman's heels upon the polished boards. I did not recognise their beat and so I braced myself at once for another twist to this strange adventure. It was always important not to think the worst though, for if one imagined monsters, then monsters could be bidden from the unconscious. Instead, I imagined kindness and answers, then looked in to find Beatrice, seated upon the sofa reading Keramos. I hesitated to enter, for this seemed strange indeed, but Ghita pressed me on.

It was the Beatrice of imagination, the Beatrice of archetype, of fantasy. She inclined her head to Ghita and we all sat down in a place that was at the same time so familiar to me, and yet also neither here nor there. I could always tell when I shared an hallucination under Ghita's direction for it had a lucid quality about it, far more lucid than the places I could take myself. That lucidity had faded however, leaving me with the sense of experiencing something while under the influence of alcohol. She had let go of her complete control, and was now sharing me with Beatrice?

Beatrice lowered her eyes in deference to Ghita, then sighed, and as she sighed, she seemed to shimmer and her form changed to the Beatrice I had loved, the Beatrice who had been Amanda Fleetwood, and this Beatrice smiled at my memories of her.

"Beatrice?"

"What seeks reflection in the manifest world," she said, "does so for its own purposes, and in its own time. If we act, it is because we are called upon to do

so, and not because we expect to gain reward, either in this life or in any other. We act because we have no choice, because it is the purpose of our lives."

I understood her, and was not conscious of having expected anything, but I experienced a flash of resentment at being reminded of it, and so I also understood there must have been a remnant of something old and impure inside of me. There was but one thing I could think of:

"Aaron," I said, nodding in the realisation that I had been secretly hoping to exchange my services for a single connection that might bring him back to me, that in proving myself pure and worthy before the Great Unknown, the Great Unknown might smile kindly upon me. "I had thought there might be a connection with the manifest Beatrice, who claimed to carry a child,.. or it might be Charlotte now, depending on which version of this history I'm reading. There was a feeling, you see? There I was, caring for the well-being of a woman close to me who carried another man's child, and I felt there was a meaning to that. Then there was something Planer had said about my already knowing the name of that child: I had thought to say the name was Aaron, though why I can't imagine, only that the thought popped into my head, and I know from experience there is usually some significance to these things, even though we cannot see exactly what it is at the time. So,... Aaron has a place in this history, a role to play, but I have to reconcile myself to the fact that I might never know what it is, and I should no longer expect to know."

Beatrice looked sympathetically at me. "It makes me proud that you can so quickly analyse our self, my love."

"Proud?"

"In other lives we have not understood one another at all. Indeed in other lives we might spend our whole lives in complete ignorance of one another. You grant me a view of the manifest world, you bring my head above the surface of your consciousness, instead of keeping me imprisoned, confined to the unconscious realms, submerged beneath the tarn of dreams."

I smiled at that. "I learned a long time ago that to deny you, Beatrice, was to risk considerable harm to my sanity. And that to seek to know you was to discover a voice whose counsel I might trust as no other."

"Then, you will try to be magnanimous over the matter of Aaron?"

"Do you have foreknowledge of him."

"None, my love. The probabilities are evenly balanced and truly anything might happen, but we should be careful not to expect,... anything in particular."

"Then I shall try to make my peace with it as best I can. But now, what must I be aware of with respect to my life at Cragside?"

"Something is becoming," she replied. "We already know this,... in this place

of our making, this Drummaur Valley, this invention of ours."

"Have you learned anything more?"

"It is a part of our selves we are not aware of, Matthew. It is also part of a deeper layer, deeper than our Self, a thing from the Collective, from the substrata of the consciousness we all share. It is raw, primeval, violent. It has an urgency. It has drawn us back to this place repeatedly. It is a probability unrealised, it is a purpose as yet to be determined, one we have no knowledge of. And it intersects all of our lives, not just those represented here, but also the lives of the women from Matthew's time who became Beatrice, and the lives of Charlotte, who is also known as Ellen. And the lives of Min, whose own life is intersected now by the lives of Kylie. And by virtue of our awareness also, the lives of Emily, your wife, and, yes, the life most dear to us: that of the child Aaron. What is becoming will reflect our vision. Therefore it can either be good or bad, fertile or wasted. We can provide its conclusion, or another dead end. With or without us, it will try again, and again to enter the world. And the more it is denied, the more it is thwarted in its wishes, the more insane the manifest world will become.

"It is my counsel," she went on, "that we make it our purpose to see a successful outcome, but I, in turn, need the counsel of one wiser than I." She looked to Ghita who gave a faint bow.

"How can I help you, Beatrice?"

"Talk to me, sweet one. Tell me your understanding of the situation we find ourselves in."

Ghita frowned and closed her eyes. "Beatrice, I am mortal, and there is a veil beyond which my knowing cannot pass. We understand, you and I, a level of reality far beyond that which is manifest, but there is equally a level beyond which I, as a being in flesh, am as uncertain as anyone. Let us ask Matthew, you might think you know his mind, but really, we mortals are such untidy creatures, we lock our thoughts away in cupboards and forget they're there - so that you, our inner guides cannot act upon them. Matthew, my love, what are your beliefs? Tell them to Beatrice. She is not all seeing, and can only act upon the information you grant a place in your foremost consciousness."

"My beliefs?"

"About the world."

"It's falling," I said. "The world is on fire. So what difference can any of this make? Why would I even want to return to a world that in the future can only be infinitely worse than this one? And I'm not talking about some post-apocalyptic nightmare - I'm talking about a world held in total fear of itself by men like Planer. Ghita, in that world we are currently kneeling in a forest clearing. It is a bubble, a sanctuary, a respite from a world that seems bent on self destruction. Can you not keep us there? Can we not fashion for ourselves another world, containing only those we love, a world where could enjoy

peace and forget fear?"

It was interesting that Ghita did not dismiss this out of hand and it amazed me she might even have considered such a thing herself.

"We can leave the manifest world any time Matthew," she said. "We have only to close our eyes and sleep. And yes, we could construct a fantasy as real as anything, but there would be no purpose in it, no purpose in our being there, and therefore, ultimately, no matter how delightful our vision, we would become dissatisfied with it. Always there is purpose, Matthew, remember, to discover and to manifest love, and we would be unwise to leave the world before we are required to do so. In any case, anything we leave undone by leaving prematurely will simply trigger a return in order to find what it was we left behind. What we do not face in this life, we shall inevitably face in others."

Beatrice looked at me and seemed surprised. "Do we really believe the world is falling? Or is it merely what we've heard? If we believe in it truly, then this is what we shall manifest. It shall be the probability we draw upon ourselves and what shall issue into the Drummaur Valley shall be as vile as any pestilence from Biblical times. There shall be demons, not angels."

"It's not us," I said. "Not what we want to believe! It's the collective vision, don't you see? No matter how much we refuse to share in it, the sheer weight of opinion seems determined to have us join in. I see my shadow snarling out at me from every tabloid headline. I hear the fall of the world in every news report, and in every conversation. It's all very well saying the world is what you make it, but we seem to be alone in wanting to make it any better, and we're going to end up trapped in a nightmare of everyone else's making. Where's the choice in that?

"All I want is to make God smile, by finding and manifesting love, but I cannot hide from the fact that the world is filled with terrible things that are not my fault, and which I cannot cure by simply ceasing to think about them. That is the paradox, that is the contradiction underlying our beliefs and it makes me doubt my reasons for believing in them. Worse than that it threatens to push me right back to where I started, with a belief in a world where everything is exactly as it appears to be, a world that came into being by virtue of no other power than blind chance and evolution."

"The paradox facing humankind," said Beatrice. "Is that you wish for so much better, but dare not wish too hard, for fear of disappointment, for fear you are in the grip of a ludicrous self-delusion. And thus by not wishing hard enough, you fail to realise your dreams. Remember the lesson of Thaddeus? Remember your brother? All he was capable of came about because of your own beliefs, whether you admit them or not. You could not have hurt Beatrice the way he did. Yet you could. The thought, if not the deed was already manifest. Accepting it as a possibility robbed Thaddeus of his power over you, but it should also have granted you the wisdom to see that the fate of the

world is in also your hands, as much as anybody else's. Inspector Planer is on the trail of disaffected young men who are plotting to kill innocent people with virulent spores, and by the use of terrible poisons, also to manufacture devices for spreading radioactive dust over the cities of the western world, and causing airliners to plummet, killing hundreds of people at a time. But who manufactured these young men? Was it not your Inspector Planer? Is he not fulfilling his own prophecy?"

"But there are millions of Planers," I said. "I'm just one man, one tiny twist of consciousness, one thread in an infinite tapestry. How can I un-invent his world? How can Ghita, or Min, or any of us?"

"By having no part in it," said Beatrice, "The thread you speak of is of infinite length, and what runs through you runs through everyone. Share in love and you shall transform the world, share in hate, and the world shall fall. This is the story of the world, Matthew. If you make the conscious choice to kill one man, you also kill yourself. That thread may be felt in your fingers upon the keyboard of your computer, or the scratch of your pencil in your notebook. If we are skilful in our craft, our stories can purify and inspire. If we are unskilful, we can corrupt and destroy."

"But Beatrice, what must I do?"

"Return to Cragside, and demonstrate your skill, for there is much that depends upon it."

"If only I had faith in myself! Am I not just a crazy misanthropic man, living in harmful isolation with two crazy women, sharing a life of the most bizarre historical and sexual fantasy? Am I not just listening to voices in my head?"

"Think of this," she said. "What if none of this is real?"

"It isn't real," I said, "It's just something I made up!"

"It is only fear that makes you talk that way. You are an experienced pilgrim, Matthew. You have already travelled a long way down this road, at times reluctantly, but though you have yet to experience that one moment which above all others shall bar your return, you cannot deny the validity of your experiences thus far. Do you really wish to return to a system of belief in which you are no more than a biological entity and your sense of self is simply an accident of nature? I shall ask you again: what if none of this is real?"

Sobered by her observations, and her increasingly penetrating stare, I replied that if it was not real, then there was no hope, and reality consisted of no more than an earth in free-fall, plummeting through ever darker shades of night.

"But what about religion?"

"Religion?" What was she suggesting? "I do not deny the religious function in man. It is central to his existence - even an agnostic gazing in wonder at the moon is tapping in to the religious function, being healed by it. But neither

can I deny how easily that function can become corrupted - *is* being corrupted."

"How does religion become corrupted, Matthew?"

"When a religion resorts to fear, to coercion of any kind, then it has become corrupt."

"And when a religion advocates killing?"

"Then it is no longer a religion, but a political ideology, the basis of a will to power by the few over the many. I am not a religious man at all, Beatrice. My quest is strictly spiritual."

"And is your quest for the spiritual based upon faith?"

"Not faith."

"On the words of others, then?"

"Partly upon the words of others, yes, but only in so far as they point the way to how I might experience the spiritual life for myself. My way is based upon the experience of that which *is* spiritual. I do not believe in the truth of it, any more than I believe in the truth of my own life. I live my life, experience it, as I experience the world of the spirit through such encounters as these. Belief is not necessary."

"And what is your guide. Joy or fear?"

"Joy, but it is the joy described in the Changes, and taught to me by Ghita, a joy that comes through stillness and the negation of all emotion, good or bad. When we are centred in stillness, our insights may be relied upon. But when we are agitated or fearful, our insights are more likely to be delusions."

Sometimes, we forget the basics of what we have learned. It is as if the foundations do not go deep enough. We forget what it is that drives us, and Beatrice's questioning had served to remind me of my direction, of my purpose, and the source of my strength. Why did I constantly deny the validity of these experiences?

"These are old lessons," I said. "but so easily forgotten."

Suddenly, the room began to blur. The faces around me lost their detail. I was perhaps too agitated, too aroused to maintain my detachment. Vainly I struggled. "I'm losing it," I said. "Forgive my weakness, Ghita. I can't sustain this for much longer."

Then I felt Beatrice close, kneeling before me, her hand on my arm, her anxious face peering up into mine, her voice muffled, unintelligible. It was as if I had fainted, and was now on the verge of coming round but surely it should have been the forest clearing and Ghita holding me, whispering reassurances. If I was unable to sustain the hallucination, I should have come around outside of it, not deeper inside.

Beatrice squeezed my hand, blessing me with a reassuring heat. "Don't be afraid," she said.

It was the first clear voice I focused upon, and it was Amanda Fleetwood's. Amanda as Beatrice, now, or rather the Beatrice that Amanda had become, so perfect, so real that I wept because I knew she was dead and I was only dreaming,... that I could not touch her as I once had, that precious moment so long ago. Yet she was *there*, in that place, that Cragside, that Drummaur Valley of imagination in which my own existence was as real as her own. An empty house, raindrops against the window, a fire glowing and hissing as if it foretold the first frosts of the season. And she told me not to be afraid, so I was not, for what was there to fear? Insanity? Death? I no longer feared these things - they were but altered states of perception.

I reached out and touched my fingertips to her cheek. "You are so lovely," I said. "And I am so confused now. Are you the Beatrice within me, or the Beatrice I first met all those years ago by the Tarn of Dreams, seated upon the Sentinel Stone?"

"Think of me as both," she said.

"How can I? One is a psychological construct, the other is a flesh and blood being, a unique psyche, external to my own."

"Amanda created Beatrice," said Beatrice, "But it was you who created Amanda. Your need. Your path. The whole of this story is told from your perspective, Matthew. Remember that. Therefore nothing exists without your recounting of its existence. Beatrice does not live without you speaking of her."

"Beatrice, my love! This seems so real. The house feels so real. But I am touched by another Beatrice these days. Are you the same? She claims to know you. She studied you I think, and like you, like Amanda, escaped into Beatrice, into you."

"Or into you," said Beatrice. "For it is in you alone we find the pattern of our fantasy. Think me a harlot and a harlot I shall be. Think me insane and I shall have lost my mind already."

"Ghita? Where is Ghita?"

"But I am Ghita. I am Min and Charlotte and Ellen and Kylie, and I am every tender feeling you have ever known. We are alone now. Come up to my room and it shall be as it once was."

"But I was Joshua then. That night was a night played out in the third person - I was not myself. It can never be as it was."

She was holding out her hand to me, rising, beckoning. "Are you only a name, my love? The way we seek,... does it have a name? Of course it has no name and the first thing we learn is that if we ever hope to find it we must forget every name we've heard it called. To know our selves, we must likewise

forget our name. Joshua, Matthew,... lose your names and follow me."

So I took her hand and climbed the stairs, losing myself into the recounting of a time I had thought was surely past.

If time is a strictly human construct, a means for simplifying a truth more startling that we can comprehend, then every moment we have ever experienced is not lost. It exists like the pages of a book and can be returned to, if we only knew how. Thus it was I found myself returned to that night of love, a man thrusting like an animal between the legs of a woman.

But this was a dream. She had once lived, escaped into herself and then died. She was now a metaphor, a symbol, yet the experience of her was the same, a night that would last for ever, the sense of a brief time together, an interlude love, that would last for ever. And afterwards, lying upon her breast, the two of us glued together, I told her that she completed me and I felt her arms encircling, holding me ever tighter, and in the stupor that followed, I slipped even deeper into hallucination.

## Chapter 53

## The Counsel of the God of Light

It makes no difference telling yourself that what you see is only a dream. When you live outside of the world as much as I do, the dream has to be granted equal status to conscious experience, in so far as we allow it to inform our inner self. Of course, I use the term dream rather loosely here, and in a way that is interchangeable with other, non-conscious states including hallucinations.

I was still hallucinating then - although the boundaries between the various levels of experience had blurred now, and I was not sure if I would ever see the light of reality again, so deeply had I been submerged beneath the cover of unconsciousness. Naturally, there was no fear of drowning, for such experiences can be the most charming hosts. My narrative has already recounted many strange and scenes, but the sleep into which I sank, cradled in the bosom of my Beatrice, lulled by her heartbeat and the knocking of the sash in the wind, dissolved into a vision unlike any other I have ever known.

I was on the gently rounded summit of Drummaur Fell, a stormy sky, a light wind stirring the grasses, a fine drizzle dancing in the wind, its little droplets sparkling clean and clear like tiny animated spheres of crystal. It was the kind of moody magical ambience I have experienced on many Westmorland days - a darkening, dynamic seriousness about the sky, but the air had a warmth to it, and it did not feel threatening. I was at home here, and I felt as if an intangible doorway to an instinctive wisdom was being held slightly ajar, its wordless counsels wafting out like smoke and mingling with the dancing rain.

The summit cairn of Drummaur Fell had always been a ramshackle affair - insufficient materials lying around to make much of a structure, but during my residence in the valley, I had spent some time tidying it up and grubbing about for stones to add to it. There is a simple satisfaction to be had from the raising of a cairn, these grey men who shoulder the wind and the mist and gaze out in silent comprehension at the universe spread out below them. My rather modest grey man had been transformed into a classical pavilion, complete with columns and a domed roof. The structure was imposing, but impossible to construct in dry stone, and seemed more suspended in the air than based upon anything solid.

Seated inside were two figures.

They were gods.

There was a dark god, quite hideous in his appearance, old, wrinkled, primitive, scowling and fearsome, and the other a god of light, rather androgynous in form, pale, beautiful, benign, and young.

When I looked at the old god, he became ever more minutely defined, every

pore, every hair, every fold of skin. The more I looked at him, the more detail was resolved, but there seemed no end to the information I might glean by my study of this creature. By contrast, however, when I tried to focus upon the young god, the detail faded, so that the harder I tried, the more transparent this god of light became.

Thus far the meaning was clear: I understood the younger god to be the Way, the nameless Tao.

"Worship me," said the god of old. "Follow my commandments, and when I direct you to kill those who do not believe in me, then shalt thou kill them, or be killed by me."

He had a deep, grumbling, rumbling tone, like a grumpy parent, Victorian in demeanour and diction,... and not to be crossed for there were thunderbolts aplenty in his pocket.

I looked to the god of light for a counter argument, but the god of light only smiled, then morphed into the shape of every woman I have ever loved and reflected back into my heart the sum of all that love. It was an act that granted me joy and sadness in equal measure.

"Your way of life is corrupt," said the god of old. "He who does not believe in me deserves not to live."

"With respect, that seems cruel," I replied.

The god of old was possessed of a very short temper and the breath of the wind became suddenly very cold: "You dare to question your god?"

Did I dare? Did I dare? No, I dared not, but that would have been to betray my own convictions and all the counsels of my more enlightened teachers.

"You are not my god," I said. "Therefore you cannot harm me. Only if I believe in you can you harm me."

The old god stood then and roared, bared his teeth and flexed his muscles like an ogre, but I was not afraid of him. A primitive man is prey to his shadow-self, prey to the parts of himself he dare not admit he possesses. Similarly then, a primitive man is prey to the whims of a such a primitive god as this.

"It's you," I said. "You in whose name our children act. You in whose name our children immolate themselves. You in whose name our children impale themselves upon the pikestaffs of the world."

Again the god roared, fearsome, ground trembling - and I was appalled because I recognised this god as a god that only the earliest of mankind had known, a god twelve thousand years of civilisation had sought to refine. But still he existed, still he directed the hearts of man whenever his blood was up.

By contrast the god of light was our finest achievement. The god of light had revealed himself gradually over the millennia, through the perennial philosophies of the great mystics of all faiths, including the more coherent

new-age flakes. The god of light had become deliciously asexual, neutral, indefinable, formless, intangible,... unknowable by all the means normally available us. And what had this god to say for himself? Only: "Harm none."

It was enough.

We knew this god. He came to us in simple common sense terms whether we espoused a religious streak or not,... but all too easily we were willing to ignore him.

I looked into the eyes of the dark god and he sneered, which seemed a very ungodly gesture: "Am I not the potter?" he said. "Am I not the creator of all you see?"

"You are not the potter," I replied. "I am the potter. I am Keramos. And I choose the shape of my world. I choose my god, and it is not you."

These words caused a tearing, a ferocious rearrangement, and the stone pavilion blew apart. The dark god became the night sky, star-less and misty but rendered transparent by a pale and blurry moon rising over the eastern fells. I had been blown some way back down the fell, down to the shore of the tarn, some way also back towards the beginning of things - back to the night of my first encounter with Beatrice

We were watching the moon by the tarn of dreams, she and I. I had given myself over to her, not suspecting at the time how symbolic my actions had been. Though this encounter had existed in the real world, our exchanges had been fundamentally psychological. It had been the night I had accepted the reality of my inner life, and swum down deep inside of it, with Beatrice as my guide.

A decade ago, I had sat with her, certain in my heart that we had watched the moon rise over the far eastern fells before, that there was an eternal moment, a moment in which we always sat there, that this moment was never lost. It was true then, and though human beings have shared an infinite number of meaningful encounters of equal merit to that one, the fact did not dilute the significance of this moment for me,... for her,... or for you.

"I understand now," I said.

"Sometimes understanding something is simply a matter of learning how to see it without distortion."

Her voice came out of the earth-scented night, honey upon gravel, velvet wrapped in silk, but now it was my own voice. I was rising from the waters of Drummaur Tarn, my form a blur of her softness, my chest weighed by her breasts, her mound of Venus sprouting the cluster of my maleness, my back wet with the clinging of her long hair. We had become one. Our conversation was now no more than a string of combined thought, a play of combined consciousness. And when the moon rose and the land turned into silver, the god of light appeared before us, seated upon the sentinel stone. It was a stone of western megalithic origin, graced by a man of eastern features, eastern

stories, a man in eastern robes, drifting out of the night.

It was Khan - but only for a moment. It was we who had chosen the image and the voice of Khan. This was a strange god, we thought. This was not a god of towering omnipotence. It was a god who straddled the universe, and looking into those androgynous features, we could not help but see only a reflection of our own self. And Khan's features duly softened, became a blur of male and female. We were reflected in Khan, and Khan in us.

The counsel of the god of light came not in words but in a leaking of thought. We were the same, of course we were, for how else could this god have known us so well? How else could we have loved this god so unconditionally? We were the eyes of the God of light. And the God of light wondered why we resisted our feelings for this place, this Drummaur Valley, when the God of light desired it so. Could we not feel the will of the God of light in the stirrings of our soul?

Joy.

The stilling of all emotion.

Emotionless, we sat by the tarn of dreams, while a full moon rose, illuminating the stark nudity of our strange body: the breasts, the curves, the muscles, the male sex, the profound stillness, and the sense that in the manifest world, although our cloak was nothingness, our true identity was that of a pebble shining upon the beach of deity.

Seeking nothing.

Just content to be.

Language limits us, and in our efforts to convert an experience into words, we must by necessity leave out some of the meaning. Even with the best of intentions, we distort and we corrupt, and all questions are useless. They are blunt arrows and secure us only the lamest of prey. In seeking the way, we shall never find it. Enlightenment is never granted while doggedly devouring the wisdom of the ages, but only when we can attain a state of absolute stillness.

Like this.

And even stillness cannot be brought about by intent.

The puzzle of the world is its apparent pointlessness. Such a bleak view is the inevitable conclusion all reasonably intelligent thinkers must reach, if they rely upon their rational senses. If, after reaching this horrific impasse, we then adopt a more metaphysical, mystical, or even magical approach to life, we might then be tempted to conclude that the apparent pointlessness of the world is a trap to be transcended, that we must open our arms and plead with the God of light to gather us up.

But it made me wonder if we should really be in such a hurry to leave the manifest realm behind, when the non-manifest realm seemed so hell bent on

flowing through into reality. It was rather like quitting one's own country in disgust at the high taxes and the violence, when droves of more enlightened foreigners are flooding past the other way.

I came to perceive two realms, each of equal validity. One is a subtle realm of innate potential, accessible only by sporadic forays into the unconscious, or through dreams and visions. The other is the manifest realm, the one you and I inhabit: accessible, knowable through the five senses and through ego-consciousness, which is rational, rule-based and logical in its approach.

The subtle realm is formed in part by our own thoughts and dreams. By its nature it seeks to make real its potential, and the instrument of this perpetual transformation is the mass consensus of human consciousness. We are beings of infinite duration, and through our thoughts we shape the reality before us - our consciousness is the primary force in the universe. We imagine worlds, and worlds there be. We imagine creatures and processes, and they are manifest. We are all gods. Such a statement is not a mark of conceit. It comes simply from the knowledge that we are all of inestimable value, that we are all responsible for the world as we see it.

If we dwell upon all the lives that have ever lived we are likely to be overwhelmed by a sense of our own insignificance, but they are not lost, these myriad lives, as ours is not lost. We are twists of consciousness, alight and alive, twists of infinite length threading through worlds and lives across the universe and scattered throughout time.

If the world is not to our liking, then we must not go along with it any more than we have to. We can change things by wishing them better, and believing that others like us would wish them better also. The world was on fire, and something dark was breaking through, something from our most primitive past. But it could not be healed by killing the supposed killers. Ideological killers are like weeds, and for every one killed, ten more are born, so your Robo-cops, with machine guns, only add to the problem. Ideologies are like storms blowing through the psyches of men. They run their course, and are calmed only by the cooler counsel of those of us who refuse to take part.

If you kill my brother, I shall not kill yours.

The god of light smiled, and the moon rose in glory over the far eastern fells, the forms of mountains so familiar to me, and lovely in that ethereal light. But I viewed them not as I had in my youth, in the half light of ego-consciousness. Such a view is like a picture postcard, evocative, portentous perhaps, but ultimately lacking any grasp of the true nature of the reality underlying such forms. That truth only comes with experience, and a willingness to reach down into the well of the unconscious, and lift up body and soul, the psychic spark that awaits you there, awaits the completion of your combined self.

*Beatrice.*

I have a memory of a man meditating - it was me, but viewed from a

disembodied self, so I was myself but somehow in the third person. I was observing the ebb and flow of my thoughts with the general aim of tranquillity, while all along ignoring the badgering of the body to move, to fidget, to twitch, to sneeze, to yawn,... and at some point my thoughts slowed to the somnolent point of slack-water, a point that finally returned me to the manifest reality - and to my purpose.

It was morning, and the forest clearing was hung with mist. I had been rolled onto a ground-sheet and covered with a duvet. My head rested upon a deep, cool, feathery pillow and when I came around, it was to find both Khan and Ghita seated a little way off, chatting, laughing. There was an unexpected beauty in their form, a divine innocence, I thought, as there seemed to be an innocence about everything.

The scum of the falling world, of the foetid river in full flood, might be lapping any day against the forest boundary, against the walls of this precious place. Even the sky might fall and they would simply blink out of existence, these two, laughing sweetly, rather than react with all the fear and uncertainty that the falling world expected of them.

They became aware of me and smiled, saying nothing, and for a while I lay there, trying to interpret their silence, finally to understand it in the terms of my own intangible sense of strangeness, and somehow seeing myself reflected in both of them. Suddenly they seemed to shimmer. They seemed woven out of bright threads of sizzling energy. Likewise the trees and the earth and the air.

"Fuck!"

The moment passed with the expelling of my expletive. And normal service, normal vision, was unfortunately resumed.

"You were away for so long, Matthew," said Khan. "I must admit, I was a little worried we might have lost you!"

I felt my sex. It was a simple reaction, a reality check. A test. There was just a male pudenda, no feminine fold. This was the manifest reality then, and for the time being, Beatrice dwelled once more within my ageing male flesh. But suddenly, how alive, how vital, and how important felt that flesh! How delightfully informed, and unafraid! How purposeful!

Forgive me once more:

"*Fuck*!"

There was no fear, you see? and that is the most profoundly liberating of things, even though the darkness of the world might still beggar belief! Indeed the world, that misty morning was still on fire, was still a source of misery for an ever increasing proportion of humanity,... but now I knew why! And more, I knew that the solution lay in my refusing to take any further part in it!

You do not know the Drummaur Valley. You cannot even begin to guess the

whereabouts of my beloved Cragside. It is a nothingness. A non-existence, a dullness beyond description. But the God of Light knew its worth, and demanded my eyes as witness. And so, with the blessings of my mentors, Khan and Ghita, I waded out once more into the foetid river, and returned.

To Drummaurdale.

* * * * *

# Book 7

## The Book of Meaning

***A Purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved.***

***Kurt Vonnegut***

***American Novelist***

***1922-2007***

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## Chapter 54

## Returning to Drummaurdale

News of sporadic deliveries of petrol were factual in some cases, pure fiction in others. The result was that when I re-entered the world, I witnessed queues of vehicles that stretched for miles out of filling stations. There were also many abandoned, fuel-less, vehicles littering the streets and highways. They sat on double-yellow lines, in the fast lanes of motorways, in bus-lanes,... wherever they had expired. And these had been clamped or ticketed for their inadvertent violations by an authority that had apparently very little difficulty finding fuel for the administration of such predatory pedantry.

I learned from a street-urchin there was also to be the imposition of a "power curfew" commencing that evening - a ban on the use of all electricity between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.. Police officers, it was said, would be carrying out spot checks on domestic premises, and violators would be fined. But there was as yet no talk of a state of emergency.

Of course by now trains were running to a negligible timetable though, incredibly, I managed to catch the last one out of Manchester, bound for Windermere. Even more puzzling: this was not a priority destination, and the train was not overcrowded. A rumour circulated among my fellow passengers that it did not possess the fuel to return, and future services to the town would thereafter be indefinitely suspended. We were all, it seemed, travelling on one-way tickets, which added to the sense of cataclysm, though I noted nothing I had witnessed in the world effected Cragside in any way.

I rode that train facing a man with a newspaper, and the headlines spoke of a suspicious Lear-jet shot down by guided rockets, only the day before, just miles from the Capital and inbound for the city's financial heart. However, the plane turned out not to have been carrying a bomb, nor anthrax spores, nor radioactive nastiness - it was just a stupid mistake - businessmen with briefcases, a broken radio, and faulty information. It had come down on a call-centre, killing one hundred and five people.

I found it disturbing, how quickly these things became the norm,... an accepted facet of our collective reality. But equally disturbing was how detached I seemed to have become. The picture in the paper of smoking ruins and bits of twisted aeroplane were no more real than a scene from a disaster movie. Likewise the ticketed and clamped cars, and the mind-boggling queues for the last sips of petrol seemed equally unreal to me.

Was this a measure of my disregard for the suffering of others? Or was it the manifestation of a psychological safety mechanism that makes human beings adaptable to even the most outrageous of circumstances?

It was one-o-five p.m. when I stepped out beneath a slate-grey sky, onto the

platform at Windermere. Curiously "one-o-five" was also the number of the empty, fuel-less bus by the pavement at the terminus, and a Peugeot 105, the only vehicle I later saw on the road as I walked the twenty miles or so towards Drummaurdale. I stuck out a speculative thumb as it passed me in the mist on the long climb up the Blackstone pass - and I was amazed when the car stopped to pick me up.

There was a jazzy sticker in the back window advertising a radio station, broadcasting on 105 megacycles FM - all of these things were echoes from the disaster, of a hundred and five lives lost, a nagging reminder, like junk mail from the God of darkness, urging me to join in with the growing consensus - of a world benighted.

That this was inevitable.

That it was acceptable for us to live this way.

"Mr. Rowan? Yes,... I thought it was you."

"Good heavens! Mr. Lamarr!"

Lamarr wore casual tweeds, and seemed altogether more relaxed than when I'd last seen him. "My usual transport is too thirsty," he explained. "At least in the current,... em,... difficulties."

I was delighted to see him. "Yes,... I suppose it must be." I said, remembering his palatial Range-Rover.

"Well, do hop in. I'm on my way to visit a client in Penrith. Where can I drop you?"

"If you could take me to the other side of the pass, I'd be most grateful."

"Certainly, Mr. Rowan. A pleasure."

As we set off, I observed the old Lamarr returning, visibly stiffening, assuming once more the restraint of his profession, and I was disappointed, for I would dearly have liked to talk to him about other matters.

"How are you managing for fuel?" I asked him, rather woodenly.

"Oh, I was fortunate in having filled the Range Rover up just before the crisis hit. I've been using it as my private filling station - siphoning it off bit by bit into this frugal little thing."

"And when it's gone?"

"Then I shall cease to function, Mr. Rowan as shall we all, no doubt. As shall we all!"

Except we'd be all right at Cragside, I thought. There was a mountain of wood to keep the stove going over winter, and plenty of rain from the fell for our taps. Incredibly the descent into anarchy would make the strangeness of life there seem suite normal - just a little out of time. And time seemed the least of the world’s worries now.

"And how are things at Cragside?" asked Lamarr. "Settling in all right?"

"Things have been a little,... unusual," I replied. "But I seem to be adjusting." And then: "Actually, I'm pleased I ran into you like this."

"Oh?"

"I've been thinking about the future of the house, about the longer term succession, so to speak."

"Succession? I'm not sure I follow, Mr Rowan."

"I mean if anything should happen to me. I want to be certain the house is passed on to someone in particular, as it was passed on to me. This is quite important, I think."

"Well, it's very simple, Mr Rowan. I can draw up a will for you."

"Of course, a will,... that's the very thing. And I can name anyone at all as my beneficiary? It doesn't have to be family does it?"

"It can be anyone, Mr Rowan. I'll see to it that your wishes are legally binding, as I did before,... for Mrs. Fleetwood."

"Yes,... Amanda. This concerns Amanda in a way. She discovered something very important, you know? I mean about Cragside. It's essential the house is always inhabited by someone who understands it the way she did - understands how precious it is."

Lamarr remained silent, listening politely. I was conscious of blathering, conscious also that he didn't need to know what I meant, but a part of me wanted very much to reach him, to reach that other side of him, the side of him that wanted to feel the world instead of just seeing it.

"There will also be letters," I went on. "And shortly a manuscript, I hope - valuable in a personal way, though probably irrelevant in the greater scheme of things, and quite possibly incomprehensible as well, though I would like to think of it as being somehow preserved - even if it's only on the Internet - provided such a thing still exists in the world of our future - I suppose the Internet must get its power from somewhere. I mean, it doesn't run on steam does it?"

Blathering again. What was wrong with me? Lamarr smiled, ignoring my decent into speculative morbidity.

"I'm more than happy to act as your executor," he said. "But surely, you're not expecting?..."

"Oh, no,... nothing like that, but it's as well to plan ahead, don't you think?"

"Quite so, quite so. If only others were so cautious as yourself, Mr Rowan."

Still, I was wary of making plans, because plans made too far into the future tended to run contrary to the tide of probability, and were all too easily swept aside. As for words such as these, and papers, and journals, and manuscripts -

well - many a fine word has been lost without detriment, the words of men and women far more articulate than I - their intricate and hard won thought-trails long covered over and dissolved by the corrosive dust of time. Perhaps it did not matter, this passing on of words, then. Perhaps the importance lay more in their genesis. Then they might just as well be written and deleted as passed on for reading by you, dear reader. It was perhaps enough, I thought, to simply bear witness to life, as I bore witness now to the little car speeding us up the long, winding road of the Blackstone pass, into the mist and the drizzle and the failing autumn light.

Still.

Lamarr had an idea.

"I could call upon you if you wish, Mr. Rowan."

Now that would be interesting, I thought, considering the company I kept these days, and the games I played.

"That's very kind of you, Mr Lamarr. However,... I think it best if I visit your office."

He looked crestfallen. "As you wish, Mr. Rowan."

Had I disappointed him in some way? "I keep strange company these days," I said, hastily, as if by way of some half baked explanation.

He smiled, his face a picture of understanding, of professional discretion.

I was only thinking that if he'd found the sight of Amanda Fleetwood dressed up in Edwardian costume upsetting, he'd hardly be less disturbed to find me entangled in a similar period fantasy of breathtaking sensuality, with the once icy Ellen McBride and a once nameless simpleton squatter, who nowadays called herself Beatrice.

How neatly we label people, don't you think? How little we really know their depths unless we sink into those depths and pull them also into our own.

"Is Ms. McBride keeping well?" he enquired. "I know she was renting Fernlea cottage for a while."

"Yes, I visited her there. You know Fernlea?"

"Actually I own it,... dreadful place though! I was her landlord, actually."

"Ah,... of course. She's quite well. Why do you ask?"

"I heard she'd been dismissed from the force."

"And that she was now living with me?"

Lamarr inclined his head, a half nod, half something else,... hard to read in detail. He gave a long sigh. The mist was thick over the summit of Blackstone and even the wayside inn was barely visible through the car windows. "Dreadful day,.... quite dreadful, Mr Rowan, don't you think?"

"Not much of a day for being outdoors," I agreed. But indoors, in the perpetual twilight of Drummaurdale, at the onset of autumn, with the firelight and the lantern glow,... with Beatrice,... and Charlotte?

Lamarr tipped back his head and smiled to himself: "I was only thinking, your house is something of an attraction for,..."

I raised my brows in expectation but he broke off suddenly, as if he felt he'd overstepped the mark.

"Waifs and strays?" I suggested.

He blushed. "Forgive me, I meant no offence."

"None taken. And you're right, though I would prefer to say the house attracts certain types of traveller, and repels others."

We came down to the little lay-by just beyond the Seven Sister's campsite, former lair of the Lizard man, unfortunate victim of a recent shooting accident. Lamarr pulled in, but then sat a while, his lips pursed, as if searching for words, so I waited as the rain pitter-pattered on the roof. In the end he tapped a hefty, leather-bound organiser that rested on the dashboard. It was bulging with papers and plans and appointments and reminders.

"This is my life," he said. "Every hour accounted for until the middle of next year. I'm exaggerating a little: I'm sure there are islands of free time, but they will fill up with detail as I approach them. And I pray they will because I prefer the structure, Mr Rowan. The structure!"

"Yes,... I used to have one of those," I said.

"And yet now, I dare say you've no idea what you're doing from one hour to the next."

"That's probably true."

"And you'd rather walk over that glowering hill now, rain and all, in order to reach Cragside, than let me drop you at the door."

"That would be considerably out of your way, Mr Lamarr. And you must not waste your fuel, nor your time."

"But even if I offered - even if fuel and time were cheap - you would still walk."

"Perhaps."

"Can I drop you, then?"

"No, I'll walk,... thank you."

We both laughed.

"Please don't think I don't want to understand you, Mr. Rowan. I mean I don't understand you at all of course, but you mustn't assume therefore that I despise your approach to life. Indeed, I rather admire it."

"That's very kind of you. Likewise, I don't want you to think that because I choose to live this way, I reject the things you value."

He sighed. "I value the law, Mr Rowan. To most people my life must seem unbearably dull. But I revel in its intricacy, in its detail, in its highways and byways, in its shortcuts and dead-ends. But what need is there for the law when the world falls flat on its face? I shall be entirely redundant."

"The world shall not fall, Mr Lamarr. Any civilisation must have its laws, and people like you who provide stewardship of them. I've been deeply shocked these past days at the state of things on the outside, but the world will not fall. It will adjust itself. Petrol does not keep us alive. It merely makes our lives easier. It takes us further. It enables us to do more in an hour than was possible a century ago. So in the coming years, we might reasonably expect things to take longer. We might expect not to get as far. We might expect our lives will demand more effort to do even the most trivial of things. But I think we shall also remember things about ourselves we have forgotten, as well as discovering things that are new. Trust me, Mr Lamarr. The world will not fall."

He seemed rather cheered by this, as I was myself. Indeed, considering my rather morose frame of mind only a moment ago, I could not say for sure where such reassurances had come from.

"If only I could believe you," said Lamarr. "If only, Mr Rowan!"

I stepped out into the rain, then thought for a moment. Was it not simply egotistical to keep him at arms length, to deliberately seek to keep this man of rules and civilisation out of the Drummaur Valley? Did I think he could ever disturb my dreams there?

"Perhaps it would not be inappropriate for you to call on us, should you wish to, Mr Lamarr, and should you be fortunate enough to find the petrol. There is a wood about a mile along the lane from the house where I keep the Landrover. We'd appreciate it if you left your car there. Also, you understand, we observe a certain dress code. And we run about an hour behind normal clock time, if time can be said to exist at all in Drummaurdale. |If all of that is acceptable to you, and should you ever drop by, you will be very welcome."

With that I left him, crossed the stile and bent my back into Drummaur Fell. I did not expect to see him. After all fuel was short , and time, dictated by Lamarr's organiser, even shorter.

The world would not fall, I repeated, and I knew that even saying it lessened the probability of such an event, if only a little. We were far more than we knew, and we no longer realised how careful we had to be in what we chose to accept, and what we chose to reject in defining the stage upon we lived out our lives. Be careful what you wish for,... and even more careful of what you don't.

## Chapter 55

## The meaning of Beatrice

Drummaur fell was neatly truncated by cloud that day, so the lower half of it existed in one reality and the upper half entirely in another. The path up from the road was little used, probably only my own ramblings over the past months rendering it at all legible, and even then as the faintest smudge upon the grass, visible only to my own eyes, my own peculiar sense of vision.

I carried no compass, for such things were useless around the magnetite core of the mountain. I plotted my way instead by the steepness of the contours, knowing that the summit lay always in the direction of greatest effort. The world darkened and greyed out, it became intangible, a place of shifting shadow, a place where reality was malleable. But of all the fells, I knew this one without the need for maps or devices, and even in the foulest weather I was sure I could find my way. Even so, as I came upon the summit cairn where once had stood the pavilion of the gods, I sensed a shift in my frame of reference. It was a moment of confusion, of disorientation, a prickle up my spine, and I wondered if I would see the god of darkness advancing from the greyness, dripping slime. The feeling passed and I centred myself upon the cairn, the pile of stones I had restored in clearer weather. Around the cairn, I had also placed a stone at the four cardinal points, one of them a large piece of white quartzite to indicate North. It was a precaution for such times as these, and I was inwardly grateful to the foresight of that earlier self for his assistance now.

My way led south to Drummaur Tarn, where I would leave the fell in the direction of the sentinel stone. Yet even as I set off, I sensed the uniqueness of the experience and suspected I had left reality behind once more. Had Lamarr been real then? Yes, I was sure of that - also my climb into the mist. Only now, as I began my descent had things become different. This was vexing, for I had been looking forward to seeing the women again. If I had any plan at all, it was simply to lose myself in that place, and in their lives, and in their love.

A menáge á trois carries with it a delightful attraction for a man, I can assure you. It is the observation of a balance of femininity, a balance about which a man fancies himself as the fulcrum, whether this be true or not. Perhaps it was this very thought that subverted my path, that peeled away the layers of my imaginings, lifted me from one version of this story into another, lifted me out of time and placed me in a time past that seemed immediately present.

And, shifting tense accordingly into the present, I come down to Drummaur Tarn to find her painting.

Yes,... painting!

She is seated upon the sentinel stone delicately dabbing a long paintbrush at a

landscape she has set upon an easel. She wears heavy tweeds, for the day, here, I find is blustery and cool, and she has secured the easel with strings and tent-pegs. This is a genteel vision of Beatrice and it surprises me for I have always taken her, through her various incarnations, to be a more earthy woman than this one appears. She is not Amanda, nor even the Beatrice of my inner vision,... yet this *is* Beatrice. Another aspect? But I thought I had met them all!

I come down slowly, not wanting to startle her and I am able to approach quite close, so that at first I have the impression she cannot see me at all, that I have come into her world as a disembodied spirit, but she is merely absorbed in her painting, the sounds of my approach carried away from her by the wind. Eventually though she looks up and gives a startled gasp. There is a remarkable clarity in her eyes, a softness and a gentleness,... and an intelligence.

Her voice is deep and resonant in the liquid air. "Matthew?"

I am surprised by this. "You know me, Beatrice?"

She freezes, as do I for a moment, but then I reason with my fuzzy headed logic that in a reality as fluid as mine, I really have no business being surprised by anything, that I am probably more experienced in such matters as these, and so it is my place to take the lead.

"Don't be afraid," I say. "Tell yourself you might just be dreaming me."

"But I'm wide awake!" she replies.

"Dreaming lucidly, perhaps?"

"No, I'm quite sure I'm awake."

"All right then, but at least you should reassure yourself with the knowledge that these things generally don't last very long. And lucid dreams can be indistinguishable from the real thing, you know."

I see the faintest slice of a smile upon her lips. "Matthew. It is you, isn't it? But really, you shouldn't be here, my love. This is not your,... place."

"I'm not sure," I say. "It's perhaps not my time, to be more precise. But in another time, Beatrice, believe me, this *is* my place. May I see your painting?"

She assents, but with a stiff nod that betrays her nervousness, and I come around to her shoulder, floating on the delicate wonder of her presence. I move close enough to catch her scent: Lavender. Always Lavender.

It is a water-colour, a beautiful, glowing picture of the tarn and the fells beyond. It carries an air of the mystery of Drummaur Fell, the invisible shifting tides of its energy captured somehow in her unusual pointillist style - the whole scene materialising and hovering on the edge of one's vision, like a mirage in an infinite ocean, fading in and out with the rise and fall of one's breath. In my own time this picture has hung upon the wall in the parlour at

Cragside, apparently for more than a century.

"You know, I've always admired this painting."

She lowers her eyes modestly. "You are very kind, but the scene looks nothing like this today. It's nowhere near so,... dramatic."

"But you *have* seen it this way,... and so have I. More than seen it; we have felt it, both of us, standing here in this same spot, nothing between us but time."

"Yet, I wanted to capture what I see," she continues, "rather than what I feel. It seems all my paintings are about what I feel."

She turns to me suddenly then, the brush still hovering over the paper so that I am afraid she might spoil the picture - though how can she if it is to hang a hundred years in perfection at Cragside? "Matthew, I've only ever dreamed of you. How can you be here?"

"I'm not sure. Many strange things have been happening to me recently. And this is by no means the strangest."

"I,... I've been calling for you, praying for you to come. We talk all the time, you and I, you must know this! You often come to me, but only in my dreams. But just lately I've been feeling your presence with extraordinary vividness, like you were watching me, and I need only turn around to find you standing there."

I know this can easily be explained as a lucid dream, or as an hallucination. But something is persuading me I have not created this situation out of the knots in my head: I have left my body and travelled in time. I cannot anticipate her words, her thoughts, nor sense her emotions, so I feel she does not have her genesis in my mind.

She is autonomous.

And real.

"Beatrice, what year is this?"

"1901. October."

"Of course. And Joshua has been gone a long time, with no word?"

"Joshua? You know Joshua?"

"Yes. You must have talked to me about Joshua."

I see she is saddened by her thoughts of him. "Often."

"Forgive me, but in my journey here, I have left my memory of our conversations behind, the details are vague. Please remind me,..."

"He's been away a whole year."

"And he's in South Africa?"

"Yes. I'm afraid for him. I feel alone for the first time in my life. I feel lost without him. These days, you are all I have,... but you're not,... real."

I look around and breathe the air of an October morning by Drummaur Tarn, but this is Westmorland in the England of 1901. She reaches out slowly then and touches her fingertips to my face. "Yet,... you do feel real! You are flesh, Matthew! Oh,.. to speak your name, when I have imagined you for so long!"

I hold her fingers there for a moment, feeling them warm against my skin. She seems real too.

"Beatrice, this is a wonderful thing, a truly magical thing, and there is so much I want to ask you, but I'm afraid we won't have time. And I'm not sure I'll be able to visit you again - these events seem so,... unpredictable. And fleeting."

She closes her eyes as if to concentrate, as if to hold on to me, to steady my presence in her reality. "Please don't leave me just yet, Matthew."

"I'll stay as long as I can, my love,... but I really don't know what governs these things."

I feel light headed, feel the fading of something, so I sit down and steady myself. She panics and crouches beside me, her scent enfolding me, her tweeds brushing my leg.

"Matthew don't go!"

"I think I'm all right for a moment. But please go on with your painting. I'm sure my presence will fade eventually, and we'll both look up to realise that we are each alone once more. I've never seen you this way before, and I would dearly like to remember you."

She returns to her painting and we begin to talk, politely at first, like strangers getting to know one another. But we each sense the eerie familiarity, the timelessness and the vastness of all we share, so intimacy and trust are soon established.

"Joshua isn't coming back, is he?"

"There are many versions of your lives together,... some happy, some not - I've had glimpses of them,... I think."

"And? Oh, Matthew, please tell me what you know."

"If he's gone to fight the Boer, it's perhaps better not to rely on him coming back."

She catches my words like the bullet I presume has by now laid our poor Joshua low, and I see another woman long ago, but far in the future of course, the same hurt, the same eyes, the same brave face - a role imagined, or perhaps even a memory imprinted on the fabric of this place, and picked up like a germ by all who cross these hills, a germ of loneliness, of love lost. "It's all right," she tells me. "I've always known it, in my heart. And you,

Matthew? Are you alone?"

Am I? At first I'm distracted by the ease with which she dismisses Joshua,... but of course she does not dismiss him. It is merely that she has had the benefit of eternal hindsight. That she loses him, and lives out her days in the lonely isolation of Drummaurdale, is a major probability in all her lives.

"Me? I seem surrounded by possibility, Beatrice, but ultimately, yes, I suspect, like you, I am always alone. It seems it's you I'm always seeking, my love. And I pray there will come a time when we can be together, a time outside of time, when nothing shifts and fades, and all the dreams and visions have congealed into something that finally makes sense to me. To us."

"You sound uncertain now, yet you have always seemed so wise before."

How interesting, for have I not always felt the same about her? And then it comes to me that this woman is not spirit. Only spirit is wise, and I am in awe of the spirit of Beatrice. But this Beatrice is most definitely flesh, and I love her in a way that is uncommonly perfect, yet also most simply, I love her as a man should love a woman.

"A part of me is wise," I tell her. "The me you see now is but a fraction of who I really am. I am, as you say, flesh. It is my spirit you have seen before, as I have seen yours."

She is breathing slowly now, and shallow, so that her breast barely rises - as if she is afraid her breaths will dissolve me. And breathless, she beholds me: "Where are you from, Matthew? From what time, in relation to mine?"

"Future."

"How far into my future?"

"I'm not sure if it's your future exactly, or anybody's for that matter, except mine. We have to think in purely relative terms here - I mean this is not my past, just your present, and that's as much as we can say for sure,... like a couple of stage sets side by side - you go through a door in 1901 and come out in a version of history about a hundred and ten years later."

"So much time! So much knowledge must have accrued. Surely this is what makes you seem so wise to me?"

"No, you mustn't confuse my knowledge of a future world with wisdom. Perhaps each generation is the same,... too burdened with the accumulated facts of our education to be truly wise. To be truly wise we must be like children playing in the fields and hedgerows, unburdened, and innocent."

"Have they still wars, my love, in your future time?"

"Yes,... the century that was my past was one of continuous war, a world of war,..."

She is aghast. "But whatever could have caused such a thing?"

"Greed, oppression, religious division,... also stupidity,... simple things. Of course the moderate majority of human beings merely wanted to live their lives peacefully, yet they all too easily fall prey to the self seeking machinations of an elite, or a subversive but influential minority. And then a nation never goes to war against another unless the moneyed classes think they can profit by it - a writer from my past said that - a man called Orwell, and he knew a thing or two about the stupidity of war."

Of course I have viewed things this way for a long time but I see them now in a stunning panoramic sweep of time, a sudden enlightenment, a vision: the Boer war, two World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the near Armageddon of the cold war, then the Balkans, then the oil and gas wars of the Middle East, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine,...

"It's all a terrible madness, my love. There are times when we seem benighted, and beyond hope."

She sets down her brush, her mood sombre. "What a pity," she says. "For none of it is my wish. I have such high hopes. Is there no good news you can bring me?"

"None of this may be your future, Beatrice."

"I do hope not. But surely not all things from your time are bad."

I think about this for a while. It's very odd, sitting there in the calm of that morning, early in the twentieth century, carrying the burden of a hundred years of ill advised history. "Many of the diseases that are incurable now are curable in the future," I tell her - I am thinking I should underline the positive, and, sure enough, she brightens a little.

"But then," I continue, having remembered further details "the future also brings other terrible diseases, unknown at this time, diseases that apparently cannot be cured."

She frowns, so I try again: "We manage to put men on the moon in 1968."

At this her face cracks into a grin. "Really?"

"Oh yes, our technology, our knowledge of materials and our ability to construct the most marvellous machines is truly breathtaking."

She senses the 'but' in my voice. "But?"

"For all our marvellous machinery, there are still people dying of starvation, and for the simple want of clean water. And all of this might be avoidable if not for greed, oppression, religious divisions, our continuing stupidity, and the continuing quest of the moneyed classes for even more money."

"Then you're telling me yours is an age that fails?"

"I wish I could say otherwise, but there's probably more suffering at the end of my version of the twentieth century than right here at the beginning of yours,... So yes, in many ways my version of history is a catalogue of failure

from which we seem to have learned absolutely nothing. There are even indications that not many years ahead of my own time, the earth itself will become unstable and dangerous, because of the way we have mistreated it, because as the century passes, we become less able to look at a tree, or a rock, or a landscape, and sense the spirit in it."

Her eyes become watery and she blinks out a tear. Then she stares into the swirling pointillism of her picture and her face stiffens as her thoughts grow very dark indeed. "I was so sure I had seen something more in this picture." Her voice has a cold edge to it, like a disappointed parent. "Certainly, there is the potential for everything you say,... but here,... see here,... do you not see that hint of light? The clouds glower at us, yes,.. and they colour the waters a wintry black, make them seem threatening. But clouds can be made to open, they can dissolve, Matthew, then the waters grow soft and inviting."

She has a passion, this flesh, this Beatrice, and in her own way on this autumn morning, she is weaving a probable future, both seeking and defining the meaning of her life. But the meaning of Beatrice both to herself and to me, her eternal lover, remains mysterious. Those among you who have studied the literature of the world will perhaps think you know me better than I know myself. You will dismiss these ramblings lightly and say that the archetype of Beatrice is already understood, that I chose her name in a moment of cryptamnesia.

"This is Beatrice," I hear you say, pompously. "Dante's muse."

Many an art movement has explored the measure of her down the centuries, but I am not convinced history has any lessons for us here. Beatrice the muse, Beatrice the guide to Heaven's realms?... Yes,... yes, all these things possess for me a hint of familiarity, an echo of former times,...

But this Beatrice,... this Beatrice is as lost as I am.

We are both flesh, yet bound in dreams and waking fantasy, across time, and probable reality.

Who is she?

It is a question, so long unanswered that I do not expect an answer now, but as is sometimes the way with these things, the answer comes unbidden and brutally frank all the same.

I am speechless!

I look into her eyes now and at last I know her: we are each other, we are the same. She is the inside of me given flesh, and as unconscious of our connections as was I. I am looking into the eyes of *myself* as a woman, and my self who knows herself as a woman is looking into the eyes of her self as a man. It seems we are each one half of the key that unlocks the whole of who we really are.

Beatrice is just a name. Yet the Way that is the true Way has no name. Who

we are changes from moment to moment, while a name merely helps people to tell us apart from others in tidy conversation. Beatrice is Mind, as I am Mind, and what I have always felt in this lonely valley are the parts in her weavings that I complete, and the parts in my own weavings that she likewise completes.

I feel it most strongly now,... this sense of something coming to the boil here, and being spilled, lost, sneered upon for a hundred years. There has been a century of creeping spiritual sterility. We have spent so long trying to name our direction, we seem hardly to have noticed that the vessel we are on has foundered upon the rocks of our seemingly irreconcilable divisions.

The old romantics: Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey - the lake poets - all are within living memory of this time, but their vision of the triumph and the profundity of an individual imagination is surely lost to us now! The probabilities of our future have been tipped in favour of the utilitarian, the shallow, the banal. A time is born, right here, in which we become content to measure the price of everything, while being incapable of understanding the real value of anything at all. It is the law of Thaddeus and the three night rule!

The price of this painting shall never attract the obscenely moneyed collectors of times future, for the artist's name appears in no catalogue of the supposed elite. Its price shall relegate it to a wall in a forgotten Lakeland cottage, a mere decoration, its meaning entirely overlooked - except for those of us who view it now with an air of both admiration, and regret.

And what is its true value?

I try to hide my shock from her, but she is clearly as shaken by this revelation as I.

I try to steer our conversation away from our mutual recognition. "Your painting hints at something quite profound, my love. I'm sure of it!"

She goes along with this, for a moment, but there is a hunger in her eyes, a hunger for knowledge, and for words - a hunger also for us to speak our names, to declare ourselves to our selves! "In what way, do you think?" she asks, distracted.

"It asks a question that one cannot put into words,... and answers it the same way."

It is like a Zen koan I'm thinking, or a few lines of Haiku.

"Then you think I should leave it as it is?"

"Yes,... indeed it looks finished to me."

"Then I shall leave it. Matthew,... have you noticed? It's been a long time now, and you are still here."

"So it would seem."

"Will you not come with me then, and,... let me show you my house? Stay

with me a while."

"That would be interesting, if I can only sustain things that long."

"Then come. Let us try. We must try!"

I help her with her belongings, watch as she carefully folds away her painting, then I shoulder her easel and we set off. As we walk I am still evading the profound knowledge in my heart of who we are, and I tell her instead that I know the perfect place to hang her picture.

## Chapter 56

## To love one's self

I am perplexed by many things as we descend into the Drummaur Valley. To begin with, I am wondering how I can be so deeply aroused by this woman, when I know it is myself I am looking at, myself who's presence, whose heat, and the sway of whose hips is arousing my own self. And it seems I am rescued from a strange brew of transexualism and narcissism, only by the knowledge that this is the part of me whose loss I have been seeking to repair all my life.

I have found my significant other living her own quiet life in an impossible fold of time, seeking to repair her own loss, in other men,... men like Joshua!

An untempered ego cannot know this moment, cannot know this woman, for it cannot understand the nature of the unique partnership at the heart of all our selves. It takes an acceptance of both conscious and unconscious knowledge to prepare the ground. Some schools speak of breaking the ego, but Ghita taught me how that would be to break our selves,... that Ego must instead be persuaded, coaxed away from the safe shore of the rational world, to dip its toes in the irrational ocean. And behold, contrary to Ego's fears, there are no sharks; at least none that we do not invent for ourselves. And slowly, sinking chest deep, we find, eventually, we can swim! And in the ocean, as in the dream of Drummaur Tarn, there comes swimming to meet you, the other side of your self.

She is leading the way now, an arm's length ahead of me on the narrow path as we descend the valley-side. It is the same path I have always known, the same valley vista, deep and green and velvety. The Far Eastern fells are hung with curtains of slanting rain. Some of it is caught on the breeze and we feel the occasional coolness of it upon our faces like sparkles of dew. She turns and smiles with such sweetness I feel it like something hot, something glowing in the depths of me.

"You are still here?" she asks.

"Yes,... but I shall fade away any time now. You mustn't think me rude or anything."

She laughs, and her voice is like the sound of a beck, tumbling, tinkling,... fresh and clear,... and far from slipping away, this strange reality seems to sharpen around me. I feel myself growing into the space it has opened. I am maturing into it, my presence developing a peculiar persistence so that I am no longer sure if I can leave it at all.

This is a tangible reality, for it impinges upon my flesh - a stone in my boot is nagging with each step, and there is a middle aged twinge in my knee that would benefit from a hot bath. And the distance has an intractable quality that

cannot be circumvented by resort to imagination.

We come down to the house. The hedgerows are slightly different, the grand old willow far less mature. But the house is the same, same door, same colours, same garden, same scent. She keeps the key in a niche of the garden wall, suggesting a persistence of memory that makes me doubt the independence of my own thoughts.

Inside, the house is warm, dimly lit, intimate,... welcoming. She is showing me into the parlour and I am pointing to the spot on the wall where her painting should and will hang, and then I turn and I ask her if she knows me, truly knows me for who and for what I am, and she replies that it's strange we can be the same and yet look so different.

"I'm sure if I were a man, I'd look nothing like you," she says, attempting to make light of an impossibly profound moment.

"But how does it feel? I mean for you, to be looking at your own self?"

She does not reply, and instead draws out the long pin from her hair, tosses aside her bonnet and lets her hair fall around her shoulders. Now she is unbuttoning her jacket and I see a passion in her eyes that is far from gentle. This Beatrice is suddenly elemental. She is a force of nature. She is a fount of love, of siren-softness, and fecundity. I sense the light that surrounds her quivering as the air that touches her skin is forced to rise giddily and circulate in wavering patterns of convection. Can all this really be inside of me?

"Wait, Beatrice!"

But even as I say this I am drawn towards her, towards that vision unlike anything else in my life, the vision of Beatrice. I feel the softness of her, the smoothness of her - all these things remembered from a future long ago. I feel her somnolent heat, and as the scent of lavender rises to fill my mind, she opens the well of her mouth and drinks me in.

I feel a guilty shiver run up my spine, for is this not even a little,... what? incestuous? Surely, there is not a word invented for what this is!

And in a secret place, the self smiles to see us so very nearly complete, smiles at the feel of our love, catches it, gathers it up in the palm if its hand and blows it out into the winds of the universe, so for a moment, the universe feels itself not to be quite so alone. And we feel its joy, for we and it are the same. There is a tantric dimension to all of this: I have practised the walking of it many times with others who, for a while, have lent to me their femininity.

"My," she says, drawing back, drawing breath.

I am reminded then of many a time-traveller's tale, about the dangers of interfering in one's past, lest it result in the non-being of one's future self,... but of course if one has already existed, no amount of interference can alter that fact. It cannot make one un-exist. And I do exist! I do experience a significant period of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries - as well

as this tiny capsule of 1901. The only thing open to question is whether my version of these events is probable or not.

"Are we to make love, then?" I ask.

The Changes answer from inside my head, telling me that all conditions are met, and that one should not mistrust whatever nor whomever approaches at this time.

"Yes, yes. I think we must," says Beatrice.

So I find myself at Cragside once more, a vessel cast upon the ocean of time, with Beatrice. And I feel the security of the ages lift us up, surround us, soothe us with a certainty that time would normally have made a mockery of.

I climb the stairs with her and, hand in hand, cross the threshold of her room for the first time, again. Here, she stands by the long mirror, straightening herself like a queen, and then she asks me if I will kneel to remove her shoes. Yes,... I have heard these words before. They are a piece of the fabric making up my life's experience, and they are a reminder of the interconnectedness of things.

"I'm wearing a corset," she explains. "So I can't bend to do it myself. Normally my shoes and stockings are the last things I take off at night."

So I kneel upon the square of rug by the mirror, so close I can smell the fabric of her skirt, smell the heather and the peat of the moor absorbed in its fibres, and gently I remove her shoes, my fingers brushing her delicate ankles, soft and warm in her stockings. She remains still for me, hands lightly clasped, gazing down upon the top of my head. I feel her gaze, feel it burning there, and I feel the heat of a divine femininity.

Again!

"Thank you." She says, then motions with her eyes to the wicker chair. "If you would sit, it would please me if I could undress for you."

Is this simply the way things have always been? My heart flutters with doubt: could it be that I am imagining this event after all? Is this a fantasy fed by images from the only consummation Beatrice and I have ever known? Other details of this moment come back to me. Yes: it is night-time, the last time, that future time,... a lamp glows upon the nightstand and the room is shadowy, but can darkness really have fallen so soon? When did she light it? And anyway it was Joshua then! Joshua she made love to.

Not Matthew!

"Beatrice, I think we are confusing matters."

"No, no," she tells me, her voice soft, filled with reassurance, filled with love. "This is exactly right. We should follow our hearts. All conditions have been met."

Did I not just think those words myself? Did The Changes not implant them.

But then what else is the Changes but a codebook for the soul's wisdom? If it speaks to me then, surely, it also speaks to her.

She continues to undress, to peel away her creamy cotton things. And then she comes to me, stands before my chair, a masterpiece of naked, Edwardian voluptuousness, of long dark hair and pale skin. She smiles the smile of a lover, of one who knows me, and turns then, the longest of her tresses sweeping the small of her back. Can anyone possessed of such an exquisite form be real? Can she be anything other than imagined?

"Who am I to you?" I ask her.

"You are he," she replies. "As I am she. I am your mistress, and you are my lord. As my lord I know you would not press this moment, not demand this of your mistress. Yet as your mistress, I read you, because I know you better than any other, and so I open myself to you, offer my heart, for you to heal, or to abuse,... as is your choice. The path splits two ways from here, and I can either be hurt, or enlightened, but the importance is in the opening, in the laying of myself before you, naked and vulnerable. And my deliverance comes only in the wisdom of the choosing,... of you."

I am mesmerised by her, unable to look away. She glances back at me from over her shoulder as she pads softly to her bed. The sheets are turned down, and she slides between them. The rain has drifted over from the fells now and a swirling wind causes it to wash gently against the window, raising a soft hiss. The sash bumps gently.

If there is a time to leave her, it is now, because I am afraid of losing myself in this time. I pray for it to fade now and for me to awaken in the blue bedroom next door, next time, in the next probable reality, for I cannot imagine what I am about to do here. But this reality holds on, becomes ever more lucid, and have I not learned by now that these things have their own way of working out? It seems I am to lie with this woman, with this side of myself, this most perfect match, this soul that arouses in me the greatest love, the greatest passion.

No, wait!

Not passion.

Passion is surely an emotion, and there is no emotion here - only love, an uncommon kind of love, one that is accompanied by an extraordinary stillness of mind, a love unburdened by anxiety over the possibility of its imminent loss.

I undress, noting the texture of my clothing. These are not fake things, not items of costume, but the genuine warp and weave of this time. I have become of this time, and of this time I take myself to lie between the soft thighs of this most mysterious of women, and complete the most mysterious of unions. And in that most sacred of places, she smiles secretly, knowingly, and bids me enter.

## Chapter 57

## The death of all fears

I've been coming to this for a long time. Decades of my life drifting aimlessly, I'd thought, and in considerable confusion, but there comes a point when something dawns and you realise that all things are possible. They say spiritual enlightenment is an accident, that the path to enlightenment is a process of rendering one accident prone. I'm not so conceited as to say I have attained any measure of enlightenment, for I am not so other worldly-wise as Ghita,... but there is something:

Something important here.

Over the millennia, we humans have discovered many paths to the divine, and the most successful hold in common the denial of the self, a denial that comes through the selfless devotion to something else: to the notion of a god, the infallibility of a dogma, or in service to others: the poor, the sick, the needy,.... all without expectation of, or desire for, personal reward.

If we deny Ego its superiority for long enough, it will come to know itself, know its place - either that or we go mad. Vanity is self importance; it is saying the words while having already lost the message. And the swiftest way to the divine, is to stop looking for it.

Beatrice was real, yet not real. She was possible, but improbable. She was a dream, fantasy, delusion, imagination,.... all of these things. And in the soft sanctity of that place, I did deny my self, my place, my meaning - cried out my seed and sent it deep, deep into the heart of her, the heart of me, then died upon her breast and in her arms.

And knew no fear.

To be sure, one gains nothing by any of this: not wisdom, not joy. Indeed it's such a little thing, more loss than gain and yet one is changed by it in ways that are quite fundamental.

From our earliest awakenings we learn how to be afraid. Our consciousness is a double edged sword, for we treasure it so much that the thought of death, of losing what and who we are, colours our life, darkens it. But imagine not fearing death - and not merely as the result of some convincing vision of a certain afterlife or reincarnation, but simply not fearing it. This is the key, not to a contempt of life, but a deeper love of it. To lose one's fear is to make peace with both the divine and with the manifest world.

I loved my life, loved every thing and every one in it, yet feared no more its loss.

Sweet Beatrice.

She sleeps, as the darkness melts to dawn.

And in the morning I wake to find the whole hot length of her pressed beside me, her somnolent breaths curling like soft creatures in my ear, her hand unconsciously cupping my sex, keeping it erect against her arm. And I'm aware of course that there is another version of this morning.

I draw aside slowly in order to identify this aspect of Beatrice, lest everything should have been another imaginary happening, but no, this is still October 1901, and my lover, my mysterious mistress is still the woman of that time. This has not happened before: usually to sleep at the ending of one of these episodes is to invite a return to reality, or at least a transformation.

I have never before slept, and woken into the same dream, the same immanence.

I rise gently and dress myself, thinking to explore this peculiar world alone for a while, and I descend into the parlour. It is a grey morning, a thick grey mist presses at the windows and the world is vague. Then something catches my eye. It is a picture on the wall,... the picture, framed and looking like it's been there a long time already,... and on the desk, the Changes, and Ghita's bangle.

I think I might have been afraid of this at one time, and it quickens my pulse even now, but not because the present and my acquaintances there are repulsive to me, but rather because I do not understand what it is I believe I am being shown.

Remember, there is no fear!

She comes downstairs, a dark haired angel in a dressing gown, and she leans her head upon my shoulder.

"This is not your time," I warn her. "Your picture is already on the wall. And here,... you see, the Changes?"

But while she stands beside me these things are no longer apparent. They are not material, but reside only as thoughts, as imaginings. The changes have gone from the table and the space upon the wall is blank.

She smiles, innocently. "This can be a strange house," she reminds me. "It plays tricks, but means no harm if your heart is true." And then: "The fog is very thick this morning. I thought we might have walked together."

I gather my wits slowly. "It might lift," I tell her. "I would like to walk with you."

There are coins in my pocket, the change left over from my rail journey, some silver, some copper. I lay them flat in the palm of my hand. They are very old coins now: pennies and threepences, a few sixpences, a half-crown - all bearing the head of Victoria, who died only this year - is that significant, I wonder? No. I am overcomplicating things, perhaps.

"Matthew,... you are a rich man," she teases.

In my other pocket there is a wallet - it had contained banknotes and credit cards. This I draw out to find the banknotes transformed, like the coins, into old tender, and the credit cards,... I wonder,... ah, yes,... into photographs!

"This is most strange, Beatrice."

The banknotes are exactly as she might have expected to see them, and the credit cards? Well, since such a thing would have been impossible for an early twentieth century woman to conceive of, her mind has instead created photographs. Yes,.. I see that now, and see also that there is something very unusual about this version of reality.

"Oh, Matthew, let me look at them."

They are all studio shots, rather formal: Sunday best frocks and stiff collars, and all rather confusing for me. "This is Min," I tell her. "And the lady standing beside her is her close friend, Kylie."

"Kylie? Such an unusual name. And the man behind them?"

"O'Doire. Min's father. He runs a bookshop. I worked for him for a while. And this picture,... this is Charlotte,... I don't understand: these are people I know in a hundred years or so. They must be coming from my mind, while you are seeing them."

"You mentioned Charlotte yesterday. She is Joshua's cousin, in another version of events? And these?.. How marvellous; you have travelled in India?"

It is a picture of Ghita, looking like a Raja's daughter,... very fine, very beautiful and serious of face.

"And this child?"

"Aaron,... not exactly my son. That's Emily standing with him,... my wife."

Poor Emily - if she could see me now!

"Her son, but not yours?"

"Yes. Ah,... now I did not expect to find these. These might confuse you."

"Who are they?"

"Do you not know yourself?"

She looks at me, interrogates me with a single raised eyebrow, then draws aside, taking the pictures with her. She sets them down upon the desk, side by side and sits gazing at them. "I don't understand, my love."

"I'm perhaps not the best person to ask for an explanation," I tell her. "There is something in the universe that seeks expression here,... seeks it very strongly, and you, your body, your mind, you are its manifestation. Tell me, were you born as Beatrice?"

"Yes, of course."

"And where are you from, Beatrice."

"I've lived in this valley all my life."

"Then you are the first, my love. And you shall leave such a mark upon this place, others shall become you. They shall fall into your mould."

"My mould?"

"Think of it as the space you leave, when you quit this place."

"You mean,... my spirit shall possess them?"

"I don't know if it's your spirit, more perhaps the experience of your life. Neither of these women were born as Beatrice, you see? They both sought escape from other lives and found solace, in pretending to be you."

"Pretending? But they look nothing like me."

"You must understand, the clothes we wear in future times are as different from your own as yours are to the Elizabethan era. Clothes are so emotive, and the life now, which is much simpler than the one we know, fills us with a sweet nostalgia, a yearning for simpler times, a time when we imagine it must have been easier to see and think about the things that are important. These women are accomplished actresses who live their parts. That is not to say they are false. Each of them is a genuine facet of your own self, my love. It is a game of pretend, but then to an imaginative child, such a game is the equal of any tangible reality."

She nods slowly as I tell her this, and she fingers the faces of Amanda Fleetwood, and the woman whose real name I do not know. "Might they be my,... ambassadors then?" she asks. "Ambassadors in this future time?"

"Perhaps that's a good way of thinking about it."

She thinks a while longer then shakes her head: "But I am of no importance, my love. Who, outside of Drummaurdale knows me? A dozen people at the most: the wives of farmers, tradesmen, shopkeepers. Westmoreland is my universe. I know there is a world out there, but I have never seen it! How can I make such a mark in time as this?" She shakes her head. "Ruskin,... Ruskin's name will linger long, I'm sure. And the poets of course: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey,... But not Beatrice Pattinson. These were great men. But who am I? What moves me is of no account."

"Who are any of us Beatrice? Those are famous men, yes. Indeed they are perhaps even more famous in my time than in this,... but other poets, like Blake, they become deified in future times, yet remain entirely unknown while they are alive."

She smiles. "It's true, there are fashions in thought, as well as in clothes. And if your thoughts are not in fashion you have no voice, like last season's blouse - at least among the fashion conscious. But truly, Matthew, I have nothing worth the saying."

Nothing worth the saying?

Her words have a sting in them, though none is intended. Of course throughout our lives we each of us feel ourselves to be at the very centre of our universe, except sometimes we lose faith, and we wonder: What are words? What use are they? What words have ever made a difference to anything? And what use then are these words? Who will read them? Who will ever know of this moment I share with this woman?

Who will be moved by it?

There is only us. And of course it's only we who matter, our only witness being the consciousness that envelops us both.

"There's no such thing as a fashion for the truth, Beatrice. Truth is truth, whether it was worn last year or not. And we are coming very close now to the truth, you and I."

## Chapter 58

## Amanda and Aaron

The latter part of the morning is moist and misty, the ground is soft and peppered with mushrooms whose scent lies heavy upon the air. Beatrice wears a bottle green tweed suit. Her waist is nipped, her demeanour is one of elegance and poise. And it is with grace that she moves along the muddied track, her steps untroubled and sure. We are skirting the eastern flank of the valley of dreams, keeping to a track I do not recall existing in my own time. It dips in and out of moist woodland: Sycamore and Beech and Oak and Rowan, their leaves turning now as they turn in my own time, curling to bronze and gold. We are heading north, then east as the valley widens out: five miles of remoteness, to the lake shore.

To Ullswater.

Ullswater is silent, calm and black beneath a thick shroud. The shroud is silver and shifting, visibility no more than fifty meters, the hills and the woodlands, north and south of us, blending into a vague silhouette.

There is a wooden jetty, and we walk out upon it, finally to rest ourselves on a smoothly worn bench overlooking the water. We have talked about my life, talked about a future that may or may not be her legacy, but she has told me little that I do not already know about her from her other selves. And I worry again that she might be nothing more than a manufactured figment of my own mind,... not a mind, not a conscious entity in her own right. And turning to ask if she will enlighten me, I suddenly find myself looking into the eyes of Amanda Fleetwood.

At once I am filled by an impossible mixture of sadness and delight: sadness that I have suddenly left the Beatrice of 1901, left my only perfect other self behind, possibly for ever, and without a word of farewell; and I am delighted because I do so love Amanda!

She is startled, like one awakening from a daydream.

"Joshua? Where are we? Have we walked a long way?"

Still, I have seen no one, not another figure from this time, and the lake, a lake that should have been filled with busy, bobbing boats, is empty. I do not know how much the world extends beyond the mist, but such as it is, I feel that she and I are the only conscious beings in it. Or I am constructing her as well? In which case I am alone, and lost somewhere, lost in time, lost in a muddle of possible realities.

"Beatrice, my love,... I fear you might be,... dead."

She smiles, as if remembering something. "Yes,... yes. I think you're right."

I look at my hands. They are cold and red and raw. "I wonder if I am also dead. It seems strange but really I can't tell the difference any more."

She sits closer, snuggles up, takes my arm and lays her head upon my shoulder. "Nor me," she says. "Where is this we've come to? How I like to walk with you, Joshua! The miles just melt away,... and time too."

"We're at the lake, I think."

"You think? Then we're sort of in between,... somewhere?"

"Yes, I wasn't expecting ever to see you again."

"But I'm always with you, Joshua. You seem puzzled. What have I missed?"

I shake my head. When things are as incomprehensible as this, the only correct thing to do it let them go and be content simply to watch as the landscape of a new strangeness rises before one's eyes. And as with all such strange lands that I can never hope to understand or know intimately, I can navigate it, provided, like any stranger abroad, I observe certain rules of conduct:

"I'm not sure I can explain," I said. "The way wends exceedingly strange these days, my love!"

*Is that me talking? Or is it echoes of Joshua?*

"Let me help," she says. "I know the lay of this place a little. Think of a bird."

And as I think of a bird, a lone Oyster Catcher flits along the shore, its shrill piping echoing from mountains unseen.

"Now think of the sun."

So I think of the sun and the mist dissolves into the lazy yellow heat of a clear autumn day, the world opening out across cobalt blue waters to green clad mountains - old and gnarled like the stumps of ancient oaks. But there are no little houses across the water, and still no boats to carve its glassy surface.

I feel a moment of disorientation and the vision begins to shimmer around the edges, but she senses this and grips my arm all the tighter. "Float into it," she say gently. "Greet it serenely with a smile. It cannot harm you. All of this is in you."

So I sigh and as I sigh I smile inwardly: calm, benign, loving,... and the world is steadied for a while. I think of a breeze, and a cooler air strokes my face. I think of people and boats and noise, and it is a Bank Holiday Monday a hundred years from now, and a lake steamer is pulling away from the jetty. There are children shrieking, and hoards of tourists with cameras clicking. And in the stern of the boat, there stands Amanda, not Beatrice. She wears blue jeans and a pink tee-shirt, sunglasses resting on the top of her head, nestling in her voluminous hair. Amanda!

The year is 2001. This comes through loud and clear from somewhere, but

what confuses me is that I do not know her in my own version of that time, have never known her in fact, and anyway she is already dead, yet I *do* know her in this version, and she is smiling at me, waving. I am aware of this like one emerging from a daydream, and suddenly I really am sitting upon a bench, watching as The Lady of The Lake begins her journey north, up the water from Glenridding pier.

Of course! Amanda and I have been married for twenty years! Our car is on the carpark, a blue Jaguar, far too grand for me, but there it is,... and I am to drive north, to Pooley Bridge, to meet the boat there, to meet Amanda.

Why?

It is a game,...

She wants to experience our farewell,... and our reunion, a leftover from the old days, the days of our first meeting! We are staying at Cragside. It is our country retreat, our weekend cottage, our refuge from busy jobs in Manchester - she runs a management consultancy - and me? It seems I no longer work for the software company - I branched out into games for older people, and made a success of it. I own my own company: I am a millionaire!

And inside of this strange, shockingly affluent and ambitious version of myself, I carry inside of me the memories of 1901, and my own time, but as if they were the idle jottings of a vague dream. I have slipped out of Beatrice's time, and emerged into a reality that is both my past and my future.

The Lady of the Lake first came to Ullswater in 1878, so she was already a fixture in Beatrice's time, and it seems a common factor also in this version of 2001. But there are differences between this time and the 2001 I remember. Clothing,... women's dresses are short and floaty, fabrics bright and flowery - too much style, too much confidence, for in my time I remember a people becoming already introspective and afraid, less sure of themselves, their clothing cheap and dour and scruffy. And the vehicles on the carpark also have styles that are unfamiliar: Morris, Riley, Humber, rounded and streamlined with an evolution that far exceeded their obsolescence in my own time.

The Jaguar smells of newness and leather, and sounds snarly, a deep throaty growl, and a bottomless well of power as I race The Lady of the Lake along roads that I had once travelled with Lamarr - driven around the lake and into the valleys beyond, to be informed of Amanda's legacy.

But Amanda is not dead, and my eyes are moist, my heart aching with joy at the memory of our years of happiness. We met upon Drummaur Fell, and though we were both married to other people at the time, we fell into a passionate affair at her cottage, one strange Bank Holiday Weekend, long ago, in the lonely valley of Drummaurdale. It was an affair that had easily blown our lives apart, for both our lives until then had been made of straw. But we had rebuilt, in stone, a life together, with a structure and a meaning as sturdy

as the walls of Cragside.

And as I remind myself more and more of the details of this life, I realise that Amanda is not alone on the boat. There is a child kneeling upon a bench in the stern, by the white ensign, a child so familiar and so loved, his presence had not disturbed my senses. Until now!

The brakes lock and the car drifts over to a layby amid a cloud of dust and stones.

Aaron!

Aaron is with us!

I am going to meet Amanda,... and Aaron!

She is bringing him back to me!

Emily abandoned him, abandoned him to me and Amanda, thinking to spoil our cosiness,... except Amanda had known from her first glimpse of Aaron, that she could fulfil a part in her self that she had always denied. Far from being an awkward presence, Aaron had completed us!

I lean forward now, rest my head upon the wheel and close my eyes. The world is shimmering and I feel it burst. I feel cold upon my cheek, and an arm around my shoulder, firm and steady. I dare not open my eyes, unable to believe my emotions can be relied upon to focus in any reality now for very long. Indeed I fear I might even be locked in a cycle of channel zapping realities.

But the figure beside me is urging me with the gentle pressure of a hand upon my arm to open my eyes and when I do I am at Drummaur Tarn, leaning back against the sentinel stone, frozen to the point of numbness. I am gazing down into the eyes of Beatrice, who is crouching, looking up into mine, her face as pale as the moon, full of tenderness and concern.

Then who is holding me?

"Matthew,... Matthew!"

I begin to breathe, almost choking, as if this were my first breath in centuries. "Charlotte?"

"We thought you were dead."

Her voice is anxious but gentle and she does not flinch in her support. Her arm remains warm and reassuring, the pressure of her hand firm, anchoring me,... drawing me back up from the well of time and probability, and other lives. I am not altogether happy about this.

"There's nothing to fear," I hear myself saying. "I've seen her. Seen myself,... we're happy."

"Well we're not. In case you hadn't noticed, it's raining. And it takes ages to dry this old fashioned clothing out - especially this time of year."

Beatrice lifts her hand to my cheek and smiles. "Hush now Charlotte. Time is something we have plenty of. Who did you see, Matthew?"

Matthew? She called me Matthew!

I wept, cried out her name: "Beatrice,... Beatrice, I have seen you - so many different sides of you." I shivered, and then, seeking to clarify matters I looked into her eyes and said: "Joshua has gone."

"Hush,... hush,... I know,... Joshua was a game we used to play,... but games change. If you can't be Joshua any more, I can understand that, but do you still want to play with me?"

"Play with you? Yes,... Beatrice. Please let me play with you."

"Then come home, and we shall invent a different game."

It seems, from the rational perspective, I had sat out all night upon the fell - imagined it all, you might say,... but then you know reality is a very fluid concept for me, and I am certain of what I saw, what I felt, what I experienced in slipping the bounds of my own time. Only my body had remained, and was by now of course somewhat uncooperative, and for a good mile I hobbled between the supporting shoulders of the women.

My women.

Then as we gained the valley path, I saw the rising smoke from Cragside and I found my feet a little, but still clung tightly to their waists, so that we moved very slowly, our legs and thighs attaining a perpetual contact and a perfect rhythm. We were one and their strength surprised me. There was no convention here, beyond that of sincerity, I thought. We might now become whatever we wished.

"What news is there from the world?" asked Charlotte.

The world? I thought back, back beyond a version of 2001, a version of 1901, and then forward to my present, which came before all of that, and I recalled with some difficulty the journey to Manchester, to Min and Ghita. They seemed now like delicate petals cast upon a stormy sea. They say a tree that falls alone in a deep forest makes no sound, for who is there to hear it? Likewise I doubted now that neither Min nor Ghita could possibly exist, so remote, so deep in time they seemed lost to me in their own versions of reality.

"The world is,.... " I had wanted to say that the world was going to hell, for certainly it had seemed that way to me, yet I held back, reminded of the fact that I did not quite believe in it, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. "It's in a bit of a muddle," I said, finally, for to have condemned it would somehow have been falling into line with Planer's view of things. Planer's vision.

Charlotte gave a wry smile and a sagely shake of the head. "How can anyone have lived so long as you and only just noticed that?"

Beatrice scolded her sweetly. "Hush now, Charlotte. How you tease him! Is it not lovely just to have him back with us?"

Charlotte was quiet for a while, as if negotiating with her ego for permission to agree. Then finally, a little subdued she said: "Yes,... yes of course."

My world? What was my world? It was Drummaurdale, and Cragside. It was Beatrice and Charlotte,... and a warm cup of tea by the fireside. And Aaron, I thought,... Amanda is bringing Aaron to me! From somewhere in time. And Aaron is carrying a piece of the truth in his pocket.

## Chapter 59

## Wanting and believing

The lessons of the latter part of my peculiar life have taught me to believe that there are probably many versions of my return to Cragside - many variations in the weather, in the nature of the valley, it's mood, it air,... perhaps also many variations in my companions - their names, identity, sex and number, also variations where I was not discovered so mysteriously flaked out by the tarn of dreams, that I actually perished there as my lover Amanda, in former times had done. But even across such an infinite ocean of probabilities, it was comforting to know there were certain common factors, certain things that existed regardless of the other transient details, the lesser probabilities. They were the markers then, the beacons by which I might still navigate the meaning of things no matter where I found myself fetched up in time.

The house was one such immutable marker of course, rising like a dolmen, like a weathered megalith to mirror curiously the megalith by the tarn of dreams. And now it seemed of a sudden, The Lady, the old steamer on the lake was another. I had waited for her, pursued her in the improbable chariot of a three litre Jaguar in the knowledge that she was carrying something precious, something from my past, and bearing it through to a future time. And then there was the picture Beatrice had painted.

I was reluctant to look for it on entering Cragside that day, not daring to believe it might still be there - for perhaps I had imagined it as one sometimes does in dreams where falsehoods are often read as the most concrete facts. But it was there, every dab of colour, every stroke of her brush exactly as I'd remembered it from that day in 1901 when I had witnessed it taking shape. And Beatrice was right: for all its dark tempestuousness there *was* a glimmer hope in it, a hint of brighter skies.

I drew strength from it now, carrying the feeling with me as I was pressed upstairs, Charlotte guiding me from above, Beatrice urging me from below. Thus I was delivered to the blue bedroom, where a fire was lit, and my sodden clothes peeled away. The women had already removed their own outer clothes, and they saw to my needs wearing only their cotton underthings. I don't know why this was the case as it seemed strange they should have taken the time, when I was in such a mess myself, or I may simply have fantasised this detail, and the fantasy was enough to arouse me, to alert my sex.

It was Beatrice who first noticed the hardening of a perverse desire, as she slipped off my shorts, and I felt ashamed but she smiled sweetly. "Hardly at death's door then, Matthew!"

Charlotte raised an eyebrow and half smiled, half sneered. "No, he must be pretty far gone," she said, "or he would have drawn that spark back inside of

himself, rather than let us see it." There was a sarcasm there, I thought. What did she mean by that? Did she despise my ability not to act on every urge. Would she rather I did? Then she glowed, the flirtatious Charlotte overcoming the harpy that had once been Ellen McBride.

"You'd better get under the covers," she said. Then Charlotte left to make a warming brew, while Beatrice curled beside me on the bed and pressed my still spinning head to her bosom which seemed of a sudden, fuller than I remembered, and fragrant.

"Matthew is such a lovely name," she mused. "But it will be odd, not thinking of you as Joshua any more."

I was still numb, my mind stretched across the void between worlds, my words sluggish, punctuated by ragged breaths. "Call me,... what you like,... sometimes I'm sure,.. I will be Joshua yet,... old habits,.. hard to break. But really,... names are only useful,... for telling each other apart in the simplest of circumstances. At our level of the game,... names are perhaps confusing, tying us into a particular identity that doesn't really exist. Who are we anyway? We change so much from one moment to the next, from one year to the next. We are who we are, and the people we are with are as we find them to be at that moment,... I think,... don't you think, Beatrice?"

Gently, she stroked my hair, her fingers softy spiraling, urging me to lie quiet, to sleep. "You do talk such a lot, Joshua, and I still don't hardly understand any of what you say."

"Beatrice,... how can you be like this, so gentle, so trusting? When I've hurt you."

"You've never hurt me Joshua. That was Thaddeus."

"But I am Thaddeus. You said so yourself."

"You're talking in riddles, my love. Riddles and rubbish. Listen, things might never have been like this again, if not for you. I wanted gentleness, you see? So I thought of gentleness, and believed in gentleness. Why? Well, we don't always get what we want, do we, but it seems we always get what we believe, and I *believed* in Joshua. If I'd always believed in Thaddeus, then Thaddeus is what I would have got - him and others like him, all my life. Funny thing though - we don't always know what it is we believe do we? I mean, even when think we believe in something, we don't always - not really. We think we know what we want, most times, but we've got to believe in it too, or else nothing happens." She gave a sigh. "Listen to me going on. I'm beginning to sound like you. Lets stop talking. Move over. Let me warm you up properly."

"And Charlotte? Is Charlotte gentle too?"

"It's strange being with Charlotte. I used to think she did not like me much, I mean from other times, outside of the game, when she was not Charlotte, but really she *does* like me, and she wants gentleness and love from me, from Beatrice." She blushed then as she remembered something. "Will you let me

stay, Matthew."

"Stay?"

"With you and Charlotte. I thought I would feel funny, cosied up between the both of you. But really, it feels so nice. Or does it confuse you too much? I understand if it does, but I just thought, well, we're none of us normal here are we? Please let me stay."

"Beatrice, this is your house."

"Yours on paper, Joshua."

"That's just a convenience, because the world we live in doesn't understand, and can't see what it is we are becoming. Beatrice, you are the centre of everything that goes on here. You really don't appreciate how fundamental you are. You are what draws me, and Charlotte."

"Charlotte? Yes,... she and I have our own story now. Matthew, I know you've played a touching game with Charlotte once. But is it still a touching game between you, do you think?"

"I don't know for sure, Beatrice. Everything has changed now."

"I've touched Charlotte. Is that all right? I know I said I didn't want a touching game, but it seems I'm touching both of you, all the time."

"Charlotte and I - we're not lovers, not in the ordinary way - not like Joshua and Beatrice were. Matthew knows about certain things, and in order to teach them to Charlotte, it means touching. If you want to touch Charlotte, and Charlotte wants to touch you, don't worry about it upsetting me. I will always love the both of you."

She snuggled closer, thought a while, then said: "This life of ours is not complete without you. Though I love Charlotte, I cannot leave you out of my love. Our story, hers and mine, it's your story too."

"Try not to think about it too much, Beatrice. We must be careful of words. There is not always a name for something. As for what this is between the three of us, let us simply live it, and see where it takes us."

Finally with the stroking of her fingers, I passed into a sleep that was mercifully dreamless, eventually to awake into the pitch dark of a Cumbrian night and with just the feel of the old house around me. As my mind wandered, I was reminded of a time when I was very young and desperately in love with a girl who did not know my name. How very much I had longed for her to know me! Every day, I had hoped she'd catch my eye and know, by means of a miraculous telepathy, that I loved her. I had certainly wanted her, wanted her with all my heart,... but she had never learned my name, never known of my love, let alone returned it. Why? Because I had never dared to believe it was possible! Beatrice was right: wanting is not necessarily believing. Only she had the clarity of mind, to understand this.

I did not believe in Planer's world, a world in which one assumed the worst in all men until proven otherwise, a world in which the many were to be held in a state of suspicion, in order to guard against the stupidity of the few. But what was there to prevent me from falling into the pit of a hell that everyone else was persuaded to accept as being the most probable future for our world? What could we do here, to prevent it?

Had I not similarly feared for the sanctity of The Retreat? Had I not felt the tide of the world's sickness washing against its walls? Was it possible the simple beliefs of Khan and Ghita and all the others had prevented it from being swept away? Yet was it not also Khan who had told me how in the middle ages the Buddhist Temple at Shaolin had been overrun, and how the warrior monks had been scattered to the four winds. Had their belief in their own invincibility been weak? No. The temple is still there. It turned to smoke for a while, but it is still there.

Was that what we were doing then? We three? Had we turned to smoke that the terrors of the world might pass through and leave our beliefs intact. I knew no fear, and in time, I might have set my companions also on this same path. But what about the world? How could I take away the fears of the world other than by simply keeping alive the belief?

Darkness became the half-light of dawn. I had slept, drifting off on my thoughts, before waking once more to darkness, this time with a woman sleeping beside me. Though I was blinded by the absoluteness of the night, I had only to slip my hands around her in order to tell that it was Charlotte. Her body was slimmer, harder - her hair smoother to the touch and I fancied I could smell roses upon her breath. But then came another dawn and Charlotte was gone and it was lavender beside me now, seated, watching quietly and holding out a fine china cup and saucer.

"Matthew, drink some tea."

So I drank. I drank it down and marvelled at its taste, for there is nothing more telling of physical reality than the sharpness of the senses with which we are equipped in order to experience it.

All this hopping in and out of dreams, all these visions of a reality that is somehow immanent rather than manifest, may have confused you into thinking that our salvation lies in losing our grip on so called real life completely, but this is not true. There *is* an immanent reality - I have touched it - but in our rush to embrace it, we should take heed of the fact that what is immanent seeks more than anything to become manifest. The spirits that dwell within this void of infinite ambiguity seeks to flow through into a statistical reality and experience itself from a perspective that is physical and time-bound. The immanent reality seeks knowledge of itself, not from a timelessness where every moment is a muddle of simultaneity, but from a perspective where the moments are ordered neatly and logically, one after the other. We have our roots in the immanent world, in the world from whence

come our dreams and our visions, and it is to this world some vital part of us shall be for ever returning. But our time *in* time is key to understanding our purpose, and our meaning.

Beatrice was beside me now. I did not know the deepest part of her, nor indeed anything I could not easily discern from her looks or her words. I did not even know her real name. I did not know the spirits that dwelled inside of her and who directed her dreams, but I felt my connection to this precious woman across many lives and many possible realities all crystallised in this moment. I gazed past her, through the window panes that had run thick and wobbly with age, to the rising green fellside and the amber light of morning. I felt the perfection of it in the hint of sunshine to come, and in her smile,.... perfection in the moment, a supreme love in everything I had, and I did not fear the moment's fragility because it is possible to attain a state of mind whereby one knows for sure that nothing that has ever been experienced in one's life is ever lost.

It was mine. That moment. Mine without desire, and therefore without the attendant spectre of suffering. God was in that moment. Not in any childhood "Our Father",... and not just that one moment, but every other that would follow or had preceded it, for I sensed the feeling flooding back and forth throughout time, erasing what had once been faulty, and replacing it with the knowledge of life's meaning, letting me see and read every waking moment of my life from a unique perspective, a simple moment, a most vital "now": Beatrice upon my bed, sweetly smiling, receiving back the teacup.

"Feeling better now?"

Slowly I nodded, overcome by her closeness and I placed my palm upon her belly. She closed her eyes and put her hand upon mine, pressing it ever more deeply into the heat of her womb and I swear I felt something move inside of her.

"Ooh!" she said, surprised. "Baby likes your touch."

"Our baby, Beatrice?"

"Mine and Joshua's. You're Matthew now, but baby's yours to love if you still want to."

"Of course. And might it be a girl, do you think?"

Her eyes flickered and though I did not see it then, I had struck upon something of significance. "Do you hope it might be a girl?" she asked.

"Yes. And if it is, would you mind if we called her Beatrice?"

She parted her lips and let out a silent gasp of mysterious surprise, then brightened, I thought, at my apparent acceptance of her game, but really I did believe her now: as impossible as it seemed I *did* believe she would become mother to a child, however it was conceived, here at Cragside.

You might think it a very strange thing, even cruel, but you are forgetting the

rules we play by here; they do not rely upon the same notions of time you might be familiar with. We would not be counting nine months. The child might come in a year, or two, or ten, or tomorrow. But there would be a child to grow up here, to know this place, to have this place encoded into structure of its bones.

I knew this for a certainty.

"Yes,.. of course she shall be Beatrice," she said. "and if it's a boy, we shall call him, Joshua perhaps?"

"Joshua? Yes. Why not?"

She laughed. "Matthew,... I am so happy you've come home."

## Chapter 60

## Primary perception

I look, act, and feel outside of time. What does that mean? It means I am not concerned by time's passing, and therein lies the secret of lucidity. For those of you who have not been here, it permits a type of perception that transcends the ordinary. I might look at a tree, and experience it not so much by its label: Tree, or its species: Ash, Oak, Sycamore,.. but by the way it *feels*. And I find the feel of a thing carries infinitely more information than its name. A name tells me only what I have decided to call it. The feeling of a tree conveys also its meaning and the meaning of something is always a feeling.

It is the feel of a thing that also enables us to centre ourselves in whatever we are doing, be it boiling an egg, or writing a poem, for there is a meaning to be found in both if we can only focus on the moment and concern ourselves with neither names nor knowledge of what comes next. Lucidity lies in the "now". The form of it is formlessness and it is our primary perception.

It is a precious thing, discovered long ago, but one we have since obscured with the thin disguise of our supposedly superior and more rational intellect. But rational perception takes us only so far. In order to realise our potential we must remember also to feel the things we see, the things we touch - also feel the things we say and do.

It was a soft, dewy, morning when I stepped out with Charlotte. We crossed directly into the woodlands adjacent to the house and there we breathed the autumn air as our feet moved over the fern-soft earth. The morning reminded me of another when I had similarly stepped out with Beatrice - another Beatrice, the Beatrice of long ago, who was the inverse of my own self. It was only days ago, but also a century - which is but the blinking of an eye if we can only imagine stepping sideways in time. That morning, as now, the scent of mushrooms had been sexual, our feet barely able to move without cracking open the tiny phalluses, that they might spill their expectant seed into the air.

But the year was closing, slipping into autumnal slumber and the time for renewal was surely long over. Yet the vitality, the energy, the potential seemed to be all around, in every step, and in every breath we took. The feeling, was not one of failure or decay, but one of expectant awe at the power of what might yet be revealed - before the year was through.

I was unscathed by my ordeal - just dazed. I was feeling stronger now, refreshed by several days of lazy rest, and the doting administrations of my companions, who had grown ever more flirtatious as my health returned. With Charlotte, as ever it was in her language, sharpened by sarcasm, but never far away from the subject of sex. And Beatrice? It was in her looks, in the way her gaze had steadied to the point where she would look unblinking - directly

into my eyes - while she touched, while she pressed my arm or adjusted the collar of my shirt and let her hands linger on my neck, her back arching lazily so her belly always made teasing contact with my thigh. Then she would sway her hips a little and smile bashfully, as if I had guessed the current of her thoughts. And they would flirt with one another in the same way, except while Charlotte ran against me like a stiff breeze, she was a gentle zephyr blowing a teasing warmth and a doting tenderness all over Beatrice.

My limbs were still a little uncertain of themselves and it was good therefore to lean into Charlotte and feel her leaning back into me as we made our way, arm in arm. She wore a bottle-green suit with a soft texture and exquisite detailing around her pockets. The cloth was of a quality and a richness unheard of in our otherwise cost-conscious, fashion-conscious, here today gone tomorrow times. The feel of it was smartness and elegance, and a prim sort of upright orderliness. I seemed uncommonly sensitive to all these things and gave myself completely to the business of observation without judgement. And without judgement that morning, I saw centred around the woman who was then Charlotte, a breathtakingly beautiful world.

"Do you think Beatrice will be all right on her own?" she asked.

Her accent, once so cutting, was now soft with a sweet sympathy. The feel of Charlotte that morning was a downy pillow against my cheek - and it was a cool hand upon a fevered brow.

"She's baking. You know how she likes to bake, and she's not afraid to be alone."

"I know, but I'm still anxious."

"We'll be back before she misses us. Has she been all right while I've been away - have you been all right,... I mean together?"

She smiled, perhaps reading my thoughts. "Yes,..."

"I don't mean to pry. And really I *am* sorry for leaving you both,... but I needed,..."

"I know,... you said you needed to find yourself, but that was a lame excuse, and a meaningless one, though I forgive you now."

"It was true, Charlotte. I had lost my identity, though I did have other reasons as well."

"Tell me then."

I was unsure,... embarrassed: "If I said it was outside of the game?"

"You'd be lying. It's *of* the game. It has to be."

"Why?"

"You need to ask? Matthew, you are the game master - the creator of this narrative. You brought us together."

"How can you say that? I'm a player, like you and Beatrice. There are forces beyond comprehension here - I've seen them, felt them. It's they who are the game masters, but we should remember that they are not out there - out there is only what we imagine - they are inside of us."

Then came the smirk, the eyebrow raised in query: "You mean we are gods?"

"Why not? Is the ear and eye of God less than deity? Is the child of God not formed from God's seed? Are we not all God's children then, and each of us with the mark of deity upon us?"

"You sound like a preacher I knew when I was a girl - I didn't understand him either, so I tired of him. I dare say he would have choked on his own bile at the thought of what you're suggesting though."

I laughed. What did I sound like? It seemed we could not be touched by something *other* without losing our minds and preaching about the path to salvation! *Are you saved brother? No? Then follow me!*

"We are all gods, Charlotte, immortal beings, capable of so much more than the madness that's in the world - we've just forgotten, that's all. You and I though, and Beatrice, we have lived outside of these skins. We have touched that state of being. Have you forgotten the dream?"

"But that was just,..."

"No, it was not *just* a dream. Don't let the passage of time diminish its significance."

"But, Matthew, if our skins had perished, the dream would simply have ended, and we would have been no more."

"It's rational to believe that, except the space we shared was not a single sleeping brain. It was another place, like this one, but inbetween what we think of as reality and the void. In that place we created whatever we desired, and no one's feelings were hidden to us - because we were truly one. The illusion of our separateness, had been removed. Perhaps we have the same power here - if we can only wake ourselves up to the fact."

"All right, some of what you say might be true,... but you're evading me,... you've still not told me why you went away."

Charlotte had come a long way from the brittleness of her past life, her life as Ellen McBride. But hers was still the voice of reason, of Ego and as such, when faced with the inexplicable, she would only venture so far in exploring it before changing the subject.

"I found it disturbing," I said. "I mean watching the two of you together - you were so tactile,... you still are. The chemistry and the energy between you is overwhelming."

She thought a while, then sighed. "Ours is not a staid Edwardian drama, Matthew. The game is Bohemian - it's unconventional - it has to be, for that is

what we are about, we three. You cannot say that any of us are sane, by normal standards - whatever they might be. I warned you when we met that I had an interest in women, that I didn't know if it was sexual or just emotional. Beatrice has,... warmed to me in a way I didn't think was possible - and I have warmed to her. I will be her friend, her sister, her mother, her lover - whatever she wants me to be."

"She is earth, Charlotte - fertile to any active desire. She is yin. Yin receives Yang. She is not subservient to it, but directs what she encounters in ways that are good. But she is also passive and cannot instigate action on her own behalf. We are both Yang. We both have it in us to provide the spark, but it is Beatrice who shall make a fire from it."

"Is that a polite way of saying I'm butch?"

"You were like a man when I met you. You have come back in search of your womanhood and found it in Charlotte, but your psyche is still the yang side of neutral. If you have any Sapphic longings, I think we may rest assured that Beatrice will bring them out of you."

"You know that when I first met Beatrice I thought I hated her, hated her for her weakness, but I was just afraid - afraid that one day I might be like her. But now nothing would give me greater pleasure, and I dream that the closer I am to her, and the more intimately I can touch her, the more I can be like her, the more I can become her. But the strange thing is Matthew, I can only become her if I can see myself with her, through your eyes. You look away? It does not worry you in the least that I might have slept with Beatrice, what worries you is thought of the three of us sleeping together. Matthew? Is that it?"

It seemed I was still not ready to face this, so I laughed it off. "It's the lamest thing: a man excited by the thought of two women making love. It's the corniest erotic fantasy. I'm afraid of our lives here becoming - I don't know - merely sordid, instead of remarkable."

"Perhaps through any other eyes it *is* sordid, and lame. Through our eyes though,..."

"A friend of mine said it was a kind of alchemy."

"Alchemy?"

"A mixture of psychological energies, that will lead to a transformation, a transcendence, a change in all of us."

"You have strange friends Matthew."

"But that's exactly what it is: alchemy. God knows where it will lead us though: the dreams are disturbing enough already!"

She brushed away the loose strands of hair from her face and suppressed her mirth with a tight little smile. It was a very pretty smile, causing dimples in her cheeks, a pretty face, a very pretty and elegant woman beside me. "Do you

remember Matthew when making love was simple? When we were young we pumped away, the one atop the other, came quick, then slept?"

"I know, now we might fill a room, or even a house, or the whole valley with the feel of it, before we've even touched."

"And if we were to touch? I mean the three of us, together, at the same time,... in the same bed?"

I took a breath and paused. "Do you really think that's what this is leading to? Can we not make private love? You and Beatrice, me and you, me and Beartice, as and when the moment takes us. There is no jealousy, no ego. It might work that way."

"It would seem wrong to me," she replied, "for there to be anything unknown, anything private, that is not shared by all. Would it trouble you so much? Could you really not be that way with us?"

"As a man, nothing should give me greater pleasure, but the wiser side of me says it would cheapen things."

"Is it your wisdom, Matthew, or is there still a part of you that confuses delusion with insight. If this is alchemy then everything goes into the pot and is brought to the boil as one. It is sweated and transformed as one. Poor Matthew - always trying to find the higher ground, the spiritual, the philosophical. I brush Beatrice's hair, and you suck the energy right into yourself before it sets your brain on fire. But have you not thought that such a thing is too,... I don't know,... perhaps the word I'm thinking of is 'one-way'. It's no good taking the energy in all the time - the energy is ours and you cannot go on quietly stealing it in order to spare your blushes. There comes a point when you have to give it back."

"Do I not give it?"

"Only rarely. When we were undressing you the other day you gave yourself over to a helpless arousal, at the feel of us in our frillies. You were half dead with cold while at the same time helplessly hot with that arousal. I wanted it and judging from the look in her eyes, so did Beatrice, but now you're all sealed up again, secure in that peculiar world that is your own, in that tight waistcoat and your neat jacket and your bookshop manners. But if we are to be players in this game, Matthew, we have to feel you. You have to let go, and be *with* us. I have not come among you to steal one or the other away. I have come here to be with you. Both of you."

What was she saying? That I was too insular, too closed within myself? Yes, yes - all of that was true. But these women were my queens, and I would only cheapen them with desire. The highest, most mighty and inspirational of women were never lovers. They were immaculate and inaccessible, and capable of lifting a man to the heights of mortal experience. Could Charlotte not see that?

What was I missing here? Galatea? Would they grow cold if I could not relate

to them as human beings? Of course they would! Of *course* they would,... and I would lose them. But what Charlotte was asking was too much. I might have loved one or the other, happily, privately, even moving between them as the mood took us, but not together, *not at the same time*!

"I will try to,... be more natural with you both."

She smiled and leaned a little closer - my reward for granting her this pleasure. "Bless you, Matthew."

And the rational side of me, for fear of drowning changed the subject: "Tell me,... you're close to Beatrice now - do you not think she might *really* be pregnant?"

"No."

"But why not? This morning I swear I felt,..."

"Because she's bleeding just now."

"Ah,..."

"So, you see?"

"Yes - No. I see this is just another aspect I don't understand. Has she said anything to you about it?"

"It's part of the game. She has her reasons. Beatrice must be with child and I suggest it is not our business to persuade her otherwise. It's crossed my mind you might want it to be Aeron? I mean her child."

"Aaron? Yes, that would fit. A part of me wants him to know the love of Beatrice, but she cannot be his mother. Aaron is very much a child of the world by now and this place, our ways would be alien to him. No, I've not yet grasped the significance of this child, only that when we eventually learn its name, we will already know it."

She glanced away, something secret in her eyes, and though she had said there should be nothing private between us, I chose not to press her on it.

We found the Landrover in the wood, its body appearing almost organic, covered with green lichens and leaf-mould. The battery was dead but a quick crank of the handle had it ticking over and belching blue smoke quite happily. Inside, by contrast, it was reassuringly clean, though the air was uncomfortably damp.

Charlotte drove, picking up the little track, then the narrow lanes that led towards the lake. And as she drove the low sunlight illuminated the interior and once more I observed without judgement or comment. I saw the texture of her suit, and on her lap there lay a twist of stray thread. The universe was in the curl of it. And as we made our way, the sun appeared to swing around so that it threw into stark relief the downy hairs on the back of her neck.

Though she often dismissed her own appearance, Ellen McBride was an

attractive woman, a woman in her prime, but looking at her now I saw her in her youth, as a teenager perhaps, at a time before the long grind that was to reduce her to the brink of despair, and force her into the lone valley of Drummaurdale, for sanctuary or salvation, or service to a higher cause. I knew not which.

We came down to the lake at Pooley. The trees were bare and black and dripping, the water mirror-black and hung with mist. Charlotte appeared restless now. "Can we not just go back, Matthew?"

At any other time the scene would have possessed an ethereal beauty, but there was a peculiar feel to it now, an intimation of something not altogether pleasant. "I won't be long. I wanted to come down to the lake,... here."

"It's just that I don't want to see another car, or a person, or anything that's of the world, you know?"

"I understand. I felt like that at the beginning,... but it's just a phase and there comes a time when you can go back into the world, without being *of* it. I promise we won't be long. I just want to see the boat arrive."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"What do you feel?"

"I don't know,... something."

"Ghosts?"

"Death."

"Ours?"

"Possibly."

"We have nothing to fear. Even in death."

"You really are weird, you know?"

I persuaded her to accompany down to the jetty and there I paused to read the times for the steamer. There was one due at ten thirty, always supposing there was fuel enough for the service to be running. I had thought we'd be just in time, but when I drew out the watch to check, I felt a shiver and I wondered. The air was heavy with moisture, the faintest sound being carried for miles, yet all was quiet. I eyed the lake uncertainly. I was not afraid, but I was unused to reading these things, and like Charlotte I felt a certain something in the air, a challenge, a turning, the opening of a tear in time, a sense of height, and no knowledge of how far there was to fall. Instinctively, I gathered her arm into mine and kept her close, drew the scent of rose around me like a spell to ward off evil.

"You sense it too?" she asked. "What is it?"

"Don't ask," I replied. "All I know is that my watch has stopped again."

## Chapter 61

## The Lady of the Lake

At a sudden sound from behind, we turned away from the lake, for it was too misty to set our bearings by it. Had we fallen yet? How could one tell? There was a calmness at least, but that disappeared when we saw the Black Maria that had silently driven up and was now waiting at the entrance to the jetty. I was dismayed by it.

I had imagined that in some strange way my longings for Aaron were to be resolved that morning, that by some miracle he would be on the Lady, that my previous vision had been prescient,... a hint from the behind the veil, that he would be delivered up to me. But as with most things delivered up from one's unconscious, they are rarely what they appear to be, and rarely say what they appear to be saying. There are always complications that require conscious resolution.

Charlotte felt silly now in her costume, like one thrust suddenly onto an unfamiliar stage wearing only her skin. She drew her arms about her, covering her vulnerability, her exposure to these ghouls from a former life.

"Oh, God! It's over."

"Not yet,... don't think it. Be careful what you think, Charlotte. We came here for another purpose,... this,... this is just a,... I don't know what this is, but stay close and we'll see it through."

"I love you Matthew - there: it's said. But too late,... too late."

"Hush, hush,... stay innocent, and we *shall* overcome it."

Planer had emerged and was advancing slowly, his blue polyester trousers straining unpleasantly around his crotch, his dirty raincoat flapping in a wind that seemed to have whipped itself up suddenly for the very purpose of dramatic effect - and he had a friend with him: a silent man, a man in black, with black glasses and an earpiece, like a cyborg, wired in to the organs of The State - a mechanical man, for doing mechanical things. It was a man who had not been born, I thought, and of a kind that would not die, but one alas who had never really lived either.

What order of pain did The State sanction these days, I wondered? Could they, for example, strip us and make us stand in chains, crouched in contorted positions, or in freezing cold to the point of hypothermic collapse, or while unbearable sounds were blasted into our ears for hours on end? Or would they ship us elsewhere for that? Was the torture of a nation's own citizens subcontracted like everything else to the country with the lowest hourly rate, and the least regard for the inconvenience of human rights?

Planer's expression was grim. He had lost his humanness, for such is the way

with Ego. You think you have persuaded it to look sympathetically upon your views, even to adopt them occasionally - but there is always something it takes issue with, and comes back with its objections, time and time again like child whining for a satisfaction you can never hope to fully grant.

"Am I never to be rid of you, Planer?"

Charlotte tugged at me in alarm. "Don't antagonise him."

"You gave me the slip in Manchester," he said, almost admiringly.

"It was not deliberate, " I assured him. "I'm unpredictable even to myself. Still, you always seem know where to find me. But really, it worries me that you don't have anything better to do."

"Hundreds of people are dead. And you can joke?"

"You're talking about that plane-crash? Ah,... the tangible world intrudes! Yes - it was a terrible thing - but it was your fault. It was your stupid missiles that shot it down, not a terrorist's stupid bomb. Either way it was stupidity that killed those people. Not me."

"You shouldn't believe everything you read in the papers."

"That may be true, but I'm finding I no longer believe what you tell me either, which is much worse. There came a time, not so long ago when man began doubting the contents of his unconscious,... but for him to start doubting the contents of his conscious mind as well bodes ill indeed. The prognosis is poor I'm afraid,.... and only insanity awaits the species.

"So what is it, Inspector? Are you rounding up the usual suspects to see if you can torture a confession out of them? Or is torture too strong a word these days? Do you prefer the word 'stress'? Of course,... that would be the more politically correct term, I'm sure. I'm also sure your man there could make me admit to anything with a little 'stress', so I'll save myself the trauma, and you the time, by saying it was me. I'm the man you're looking for - me and my secret ways, my secret messages, my secret nature. And all secrets must be dark, eh? There is no goodness in the dark forest,... only demons. No private romance, no mysterious eroticism hidden within the code, but only sordid revelation and fear."

"I'm obliged, but I haven't come for you," he said. "I've come for her." Planer shook his head in disdain. "Have you any idea how ridiculous you look, Constable?"

"What can you possibly want with Charlotte?"

"Charlotte is it? Ah,... yes, of course - the *cousin*! Look, I don't want your confession Rowan. It's worthless. What I want is to put an end to this preposterous game. Enough secrets, enough creeping around in the dark forest. Mine is the only game that will keep you safe."

"That's interesting - you mean to keep me safe by taking away my freedom?

You'd rather turn me in to another of these,... " I gestured to the robo-cop, who seemed a grim fragment of my own shadow now,... of all I feared in myself, of all I did not want to be: a lobotomised automaton. Could this being possibly have a soul, I wondered? How much more alive was he than a frog or a beetle or a lizard?

"It's too late, Inspector. Once you awaken this part of yourself, it's a game unto death. What? You smile? Very well, enjoy it, for only in this moment are we entangled. There are other moments where we are free of each other entirely."

I was not entirely reckless in what I said and I reasoned that Ego cannot knowingly destroy its own consciousness. It's rather like sawing off the branch on which it is sitting. But on the other hand Ego is perfectly capable of imprisoning itself in a madhouse of its own petulance, for it is a stupid child if left unchecked and unguided by the mothering nature of that which lies within us.

"Pain is remarkable," said Planer, "It can make people suddenly believe in the exact opposite of what they've been saying all their lives. You talk very well,... but you're weak,... I can turn you into anything I want. All I have to do is hurt you. Have you forgotten your Orwell, Mr. Rowan? Have you forgotten what lies in room 101? It is the thing you most fear. It's different for everyone, but with you all I have to do is hurt her - and her punishment will be very long, I can assure you."

"You can't touch her."

"Oh? This woman is a servant of the state."

"No. The state aspires only to a nation of robots, like your associate here. And this woman is not a robot. This woman has remembered who she was, who she is, and who she wants to be."

"Once a servant of the state, you are always its property. Come along Charlotte. We'll pick the twitchy lady up as well. She's a danger to society, a temptress with a knife tucked behind her back - better for everyone if she's secure in a home for the confused. Give the demons of the dark forest an inch and she'll slice your privates off. See how you get on then, Rowan. See how easy it is to pretend, when your playmates have all been taken back into the real world, exposed for the imbeciles and misanthropes they really are."

Charlotte had remained quiet throughout but I could feel her trembling now, and not with fear. "If you touch Beatrice I *will* kill you," she said. Her voice was strong and clear. It had ice in it, ice that could both burn and chill - but this was Ellen, her accent stark her tone measured and sinister, the man in her rising clear once more. "I'll kill you and anyone else who sets foot in that valley - so if you're going to take me now, you'd better make sure I disappear for ever,... and even then I'll find a way. I curse you, with every particle of my being. You and all your kind,... you're as filthy and depraved as the fools you

say you're fighting,... may all that's wise and decent see to it that you tear yourselves limb from limb and leave the rest of us in peace."

I pressed her hand, squeezed it hard - squeezed off the flow of blackness, for this was an evil spell, and one should be careful not to visit the fallout of such things upon one's self. "No, Ellen - that's not the way. No blackness. We must keep ourselves innocent, remember? Let Charlotte back in."

She stamped her foot at the unfairness of it. "Only a moment ago we had our dreams. How can he just appear like this now and steal them away?"

"That's the nature of one's ego, Charlotte."

"This is no time for metaphors! Think! How do we stop him?"

Planer seemed to have reached the end of his patience and he motioned to his mechanical man, who stepped forward. I wondered about hitting him, but dismissed the idea as ludicrous. Then I noticed a length of three-by-two leaning against the handrail of the jetty. Had I put it there? Was I to hit him with it? I would probably end up being beaten with it myself, but I made a grab for it all the same. I could barely grip it, let alone swing it. I was fooling no one, and yet the man stopped in his tracks. Innocence? Was it more innocent to simply let him pass and take her? Or should I put up a fight no matter how futile. While I was trying to work this one out he lifted his sunglasses and I was surprised to see confusion and fear in his eyes - Planer too.

I felt gratified of course, and stupidly proud that I had apparently dissuaded them. But my self-congratulations disappeared when I realised they were not looking at me at all but over my shoulder at something else. Charlotte had already turned and was mesmerised as the Lady of the Lake drew up gently - not setting the hills a-throbbing with her modern diesel engines, but shushing softly with her Edwardian steam. And the walrus-mustachioed crew gazed ashore, brass buttons glinting, and in the bow there stood waving, Amanda, who was Beatrice from long ago, and before her, leaning back against her bosom,... there stood Aaron!

The timber in my hands dissolved. Planer and his man were pale and shaken, as if they had both seen a phantasm. The stronger one's ego is, the more brittle when confronted by the inexplicable.

Aaron!

What now? Were we to get aboard and steam away into the mist, into some other version of this story? It was a possibility, but Charlotte was frozen to the spot and I had to place a gentle pressure in the small of her back to get her to venture a few steps towards the vessel.

The Lady churned water as her engine ran full astern, and she stopped short of the pier, held herself apart, hovered there an arm's breadth from docking in my own reality. No. We were not being invited to climb aboard.

Beatrice was still, both arms holding Aaron in a protective embrace as they gazed at me, at us. I prayed the unwieldy dynamic of Planer would not unbalance this moment, and render it transient. It was her eyes,... the eyes of Beatrice, so bright, so clear, and so full of love as she hugged Aaron to her bosom, and Aaron,... ten years old, an untroubled smile, a precious smile, a smile that his life had not yet damaged. He was fragile though, and I feared for him, knowing in my heart that only a rare and future love would repair the inevitable loss of self he would feel, as he grew into a man, in the world that was becoming.

"You were waiting," said Aaron, gleefully. "Bee promised me you'd come."

Bee? Yes,... he'd always called her Bee. Some where else, some when else. Bee! His voice was so clear, so full of boyish enthusiasm! So full of dreams! If only she would speak as well! How I would have loved to hear that voice again!

"I'll always be here, Aaron. I can't come to you - you understand? I want to very much, but I can't. You can find me though. Here. Any time. You have only to look for me. I have left a trail for you to follow."

Would my words reach him, I wondered? Would they weave into the dreams of the many Aarons defined by that single conscious twist of whom this spectre before me was but the one manifestation? The Lady was edging astern now, slipping back into the lake. In a moment she would swing in a wide arc to point away from us, before disappearing back into the twilight universe of and unrealised probability, a place where all things are still possible.

I dipped my hand into my pocket and sealed my fingers around a pebble. I was puzzled, because I thought I'd tossed it away on a dream and a prayer long ago, but there it was again, and I drew it out. I did not know if it would pass into his world, but I tossed it over, and with all the quickness of his youth, he caught it and held it in his palm. Then they waved one last time, and The Lady slid back down the dark lake. We remained staring long after the mists had closed and the sound of her engine had sunk into the wind.

"Did you see?" I asked.

Charlotte nodded, trembling, but calm. "It was her,... Amanda."

"And the child,... did you see the child?"

"Yes,... the boy," she said. "But how can it have been Amanda? Was it her,... ghost?"

"I don't think we can say for sure what it was. Aaron was with her,... and he's alive somewhere in my own time,... so no, they were not ghosts,... possibilities perhaps,... but real,... somewhere,... and they knew us!"

The Lady. The Lady of the Lake!

*Nothing is without meaning!*

I was reminded then, like someone recalling part of a forgotten dream, that in the folklore of these islands, the Lady has many names, many aspects, one of them being Gwendoloena - sometimes wife, sometimes devoted scribe and lover of the Celtic sage Myrddin. Myrddin is the wise old man, archetype of the latter stages of human spiritual transformation. He is the Merlin of Arthurian legend, the mystic whose powers are eventually outstripped by Gwendoloena, sometimes known as Nimue, she who was the giver of the magical sword to the ill fated but heroic mortal, Arthur. Locked in his love for Gwendoloena, Myrddin is unable to intervene in Arthur's fate and prevent his fall at the battle of Camlann. So the sword, symbol of a divine kingship, the kingship bestowed upon mortals by spiritual consent, is returned to the Lady of the Lake.

There was great meaning here. For the masculine aspect of the unconscious to be in thrall to the feminine does not bode well for the mortal consciousness they both serve. As in the Tai Chi of Daoist philosophy, the dark power, the yin, receives the light, the yang, in order to yield the ten thousand things of the manifest world. But when the dark power seeks control, instead of an harmonious balance, innocence is lost and what is created cannot be sustained for long. It ages prematurely, becomes corrupt, and withers.

In my own myth of course, The Lady was not Gwendoloena, or Nimue: it was Beatrice. And like Gwendoloena, Beatrice had many aspects; outer, inner, mortal, divine,.. fact, fiction. Had I not encountered her that first evening by the Tarn of Dreams, by the pool of the unconscious? And in a vision, had we not merged as one beneath its waters?

There was a movement of something chill passing up my spine, and I became aware of the watch ticking in my pocket once more. When we turned to our fate, both Planer and the mechanical man had gone.

Charlotte took a step, giving her head a shake as if to restore its normal function. "Were you really going to hit him with that plank?"

I thought about this. "It seems I was, yes."

"But why? It would have been hopeless. And hardly,... *innocent*."

"I know. I suppose I felt I had to try. It would not have hurt him, but if I'd not tried, Charlotte, I was worried you might think badly of me."

"Bless you,... you stupid man."

We walked slowly back to the Landrover.

"Were they ever here, do you think?" she asked. "I mean in a sense that meant something,... to them? Was it real for them? Will they leave us alone now?"

There were tyre marks in the mud, where I thought the Black Maria had been, and there were wet footprints upon the timbers of the jetty, most of them our own, but others that possibly were not.

"They were here. But whether we are still where they are is another question.

Perhaps its us who have disappeared from their world."

I checked the watch again; it was still running - a simple thing, but it was only by such mundane details I could now tell one reality from another. It was something at least. Charlotte gazed once more down the lake. "What time is it?"

"Ten twenty five."

"Cragside or GMT?"

"GMT."

"Then we're ahead of ourselves. Should we wait for The Lady again?"

"No,... we should go. We've already seen what we came to see. Anything else would just confuse us."

"Like we're not confused already? What did it any of it *mean*, Matthew?"

"Ego is resolved, Planer will not bother us again."

"And Aaron?"

"Aaron is also resolved. Beatrice will look after him."

"You mean Emily, your wife?"

"No, Beatrice. Not *our* Beatrice - a different Beatrice - she has more than one aspect, you see?"

"I don't think I see at all, no!"

"These are things I've not explained to you because I don't really understand them myself. They are the beginnings of a personal mythology, but one shaped by the collective mythologies of mankind. She's moving inside of him now, and I must let him go. Ghita reminded me recently that we cannot keep what is not truly ours, no matter how hard we try. Why do I want him? Is it the desire to nurture him? Or possess him? Or do I want to hold onto something inside of myself, something from long ago, something childish."

"You devoted your best years to raising him. Who can blame you for wanting to see him?"

"It means nothing. I made the choice to nurture him, but from the moment he was born, the mortal Aaron belonged only to one person."

"Emily?"

"No, to himself. Love is letting go. There is no reward for bringing a child into the world. You bring them up, set them on their way and that is that. I see it now."

I loved Aaron, but was at last reconciled to the fact that I would probably never see him again, not in this version of reality. As with all dream motifs, they are only aspects of the dreamer's unconscious. Aeron was symbolic of

something inside of me, either my childish psyche, or my own potential for renewal. Whatever his nature, I had to let him go, but that did not mean our fates were not intimately entwined, for had his presence, near or far, not already transformed my life?

"Gwendoloena." I muttered.

"What? Who?"

"I must be wary of Gwendoloena."

"You're losing me now. Who is Gwendoloena?"

"Someone I must not let my old man fall too deeply in love with."

"Or else what?"

"Or else my marriage will be a disaster."

"I thought your marriage *was* a disaster."

"Hm?... Yes,... yes it was wasn't it? That's interesting,... but no, this is different!"

"You're making no sense, as usual."

"I know. I've no idea what it means, or what to do about it. But if I am being made aware of old men and Gwendoloena, one thing is certain: it means I already possess the sword. I just have to take care I don't lose it, as Arthur did."

"Arthur's sword? Who's Arthur for heaven's sake?"

"Charlotte, I love you, but you are being deliberately dense."

"And you are being effortlessly incoherent."

"The mandate. I possess the mandate! Otherwise what else has all of this been about?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

We returned to the Landrover and I sat behind the wheel, only to be pressed firmly across into the passenger seat by a Charlotte who did not quite trust me to find our way home.

She was probably right.

"We're talking about King Arthur," she said, eventually. "Merlin and the grail. I'm not completely stupid. But an Excalibur doesn't have to be a shining sword, does it? It can be anything, any sort of token. I mean we're talking metaphors here."

"Yes, it could be anything, or maybe nothing,... maybe just the idea of something."

"But it *could* be symbolised, crystallised in a physical object?"

"Yes,.... what are you driving at?"

"Like a pebble maybe?"

"Like you said, it could be anything."

"How long have you had that pebble, Matthew - the one you just tossed into the lake."

"I didn't toss it into the lake, Aaron caught it. You saw him catch it!"

"How long?"

"A decade. Since Amanda. Since I woke up one morning and found myself as a part of the dream she was weaving. I took it from the beck by the house. But then,..."

"What?"

"I thought I'd already thrown it away, given it back, tossed it into Drummaur Tarn - but that must have been another pebble."

"Either that or your Gwendoloena, your lady of the lake didn't want it then."

"But why would she take it back now?"

Charlotte was right in this. I felt it like a blade between the ribs, and all my arguments were only feeble attempts to evade the truth: that in the moment of my apparent salvation from Ego's grip, I'd made a mistake. All I could hope was that since she'd returned the stone to me once, she might do so again. But I still didn't know what it was I'd done, or not done to provoke her displeasure. Perhaps it was unavoidable, and this was the way with all mortals: we were bound to fail, and all that awaited any hero, no matter how mighty, was tragedy.

The sun came through the trees as we drove creating a strobing background of dazzling light against which Charlotte's proud profile half dissolved into impressionism. She became the suggestion of a woman - in a place half removed from the space she occupied. It might have been a moment for the savouring of a strange wordless beauty, but instead I was overcome with the sudden desire to dissolve my own self and melt into her, like mist in mist. Then, as if ruined by the thought of it, she became firm flesh once more, while the desire in me grew stronger, grew filthy and I wanted her to stop the car, so I could merge with her in a less poetic way, merge with her like a jackhammer, like a rutting stag - wild, blind, all or nothing and not stop until she pushed me off breathless and dazed and full of me!

She smiled. "Better now?"

"Charlotte?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Drive on."

I felt ashamed. Had Thaddeus swelled with animal lust like that when he'd raped Beatrice? And how much further away from rape was the thing I'd just contemplated? For sure even if she'd tried to press me away I would have persisted, hoping her no's meant yes and that her struggles were just her way of heightening our mutual pleasure in the madness of the moment. Of course there was a difference, that in the taking of her my desire would also have been to confirm the seal between us - to make it unbreakable - where so far as I could tell Thaddeus had intended only to destroy the flesh that was to become Beatrice. But I did not see it that way at the time and even if I had, my mood was such that I would have prophesied a future of short lived mortal passion, for such things led only to trouble, didn't they? They led only to weariness and heartache and partings, and the eventual ruin of one's dreams? This talk of alchemy was nonsense and sex was always simply sex.

## Chapter 62

## The Light of Dawn

Charlotte and I found our steps quickening as we neared the house. The woods were silent and even the fells seemed to hold their breath, so that we half expected some calamity to have overtaken us, but when we entered the warmth of Cragside, it was to hear the stove whispering its comforts, and to find Beatrice lifting sweet smelling bread from the oven. We glanced at one another then, and I fancy I saw a tear in Charlotte's eye. She was so relieved to see her that at once she embraced Beatrice. I looked on, still wondering what all of this meant for us, now and in particular, since the loss of my mandate, what the hell any of it meant for me.

"What is it, Charlotte? Whatever's the matter?"

And seeing their embrace, seeing their faces close, their eyes searching and tender, I thought of Min and Kylie. I saw them entwined, wet with their loving and dreamy in their rapture and could of course no longer divine anything profound from the tortured tangle of my lust. So, I turned away, to my desk and to the Changes, feeling lost, feeling like a man stripped bare and alone. There was such a warmth between them, a love, and a story in which I took no part. I could do nothing else but put myself always on the outside of them, if only for my own protection, for the fear - yes the fear - of pressing myself into the inviting space that lay between them.

There was a volume of Wordsworth's poems on the desk; Beatrice had perhaps put him there, for she had lately grown fond of his Daffodils and would read the verses over and over, her head nodding gently to the rhythm of his words. Wordsworth troubled me. Other than his name, I was entirely ignorant of him, and of whatever philosophical or poetic thread he represented in the world today. But his ghost had become for me the shadow of the Old Man, so there was a connection: the Old Man and Gwendoloena, the man and his muse, the man torn between his dick and the contemplation of loftier goals. Does Myrddin spurn her and guide Ego, guide Arthur, to victory at Camlann? Or does he embrace her and let Arthur fall?

Like me, Wordsworth had shared his home with two women - his devoted muse and sister, Dorothy, and his wife, Mary - also at one point his sister in law, Sara Hutchinson. The gossips have since made much of this, implying there must have been an incestuous menage a trois or quatre. Was that why I feared a slide into the dung-heap of sexual depravity with Charlotte and Beatrice, fear of you, my unknown reader and your misunderstanding? Did I fear your interest more in matters of a personal nature, than what we were trying to achieve here?

Some stories have it that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth's great friend,

who was besotted with Sara Hutchinson, wrote, in a fit of jealousy, that he had seen Wordsworth making love to her. But what had he meant by that? Had he climbed the stairs at dead of night and spied upon them pounding the bed springs, or had he, through his green tinted lover's eyes, merely misinterpreted a tender look, or some affectionate banter.

The romantic poets burned bright in their time, borne upon the waves of their overwhelming passion, but they were often visionaries who fell short of mature sage-hood, if only by virtue of their early deaths. It was as if the flames of their passions hastened only their premature immolation, and hence was born the sense that tragedy must always play its part in romance. Their Excaliburs, the enchanted swords of these heroic men, symbols of their power, their mandates from the gods, were slipped back into the dark waters of the lake, and a cycle of myth closed over them. But Wordsworth went on.

Wordsworth lived.

His women adored him - this much we know from their letters - but I think he had solved the riddle of Gwendoloena and won them as his devoted loves, without the need to take them also as his lovers. I don't know if this was true of course - Wordsworth is a long time dead and no longer available for interview, but it was an impression I had gleaned from somewhere and so it was important for me - forgive me William, if I misrepresent you. It was important, because it is a dangerous trap for all who tread this path, a trap that must be circumvented or it will detain us and might ultimately lead to our destruction. Wordsworth was eighty when he died. I prayed that I might also be so lucky.

Let me try to explain: if a man pays sufficient attention to the advice of his muse, then the wise man's influence will begin to grow in his unconscious. Such a character manifests itself in dreams as an aged father figure, or in myth as the sage, as Myrddin, or in my own myth, it seemed, as Wordsworth. Once awakened, the wise man must cooperate with Gwendoloena, wise mistress and muse. Take care though that the sage does not fall blindly in love with her, for that is not her purpose and she will consume him!

But is it equally unwise to reject her?

To the mortal man, there is only one kind of marriage, one kind of consummation, but if he wishes to near his potential he must somehow begin to conceive of another. This is the riddle of Gwendoloena. Wordsworth solved it and managed to reach his old age with grace and dignity. Me? I could only look on with admiration, and pray that in dreams he would come, put a fatherly hand upon my shoulder and tell me how the hell he'd managed it.

*"He who has truly lost all fear, will surely be the most sincere."*

Sorry, William - I know you would have put it much better than that, but several days of reading your poems, and consulting the Changes could inspire in me no better bit of doggerel, and it followed me up the stairs to bed one

evening like a terrier snapping at my heels and ringing in my ears. The women watched me go. There had been a distance between us since Charlotte and I had return from the lake that day. I smiled my goodnights, but there was no response from them - their eyes were still, like stagnant pools reflecting a stormy sky. For all their gentle flirting, I fear I had disappointed them.

Then I was asleep, and dreaming of a clearing in the forest at the retreat. No, not dreaming: Cragside dreams are not dreams - they are too vivid, and crackle with a detail that transcends mere reality. Wordsworth - in frock coat - was discussing my case with Khan and, upon seeing me, Wordsworth turned away in exasperation. Then Khan laughed as only Khan can laugh, and he bade me sit down - he wanted to tell me a story. It was a story I had already heard - or at least I believed I had heard it, or read it somewhere, but I did not want to give offence to Khan, so I sat down to listen.

He told me that once upon a time, two monks were walking. It was the rainy season and the roads were a mess. They came upon a very pretty young woman by the roadside, wanting to cross, but she was afraid in case she dirtied her clothes in the mud. The younger of the monks looked away, embarrassed to gaze upon her loveliness, but the older monk greeted her warmly, picked her up and carried her over the mud, depositing her safely on the other side. His younger friend did not speak to him for the rest of the day. Eventually, the older monk could stand his companion's silence and his disapproving looks no more and asked him what was the matter.

"You know we must be careful of women," said the young monk. "Especially the pretty ones. They're distracting and dangerous for men like us to be around."

"I left that girl by the side of the road this morning," replied the older monk. "You've obviously been carrying her around all day!"

A man's sexual nature is a part of his life, though prim convention would have him deny it out of an imagined and entirely subjective sense of what constitutes propriety. Then again some poor souls, having torn down the facade of prudishness, can see no further than the sex and they promptly drown in the hot, sticky pool of it. But in all of this I sensed the time for symbols was coming to an end and that the world would soon take back what was its own, that it would invite into existence only those unconscious energies to whom I had paid sufficient courtesy. And I still bitterly regretted my handing over of that one last symbol, of the pebble, my own Excalibur, my own mandate - handed it back, on a whim, to the vision of Aaron.

I had since returned to the beck and found other small pieces of pink veined quartz, but when I'd held them, I'd known they possessed no power to transform - they were merely replicas and could never have been any more than mementos of the time when I'd possessed it, and for some reason thrown it away on such a bizarre misunderstanding. My memories of Aaron and all he had meant to me, seemed to have been my undoing. They had turned out to be

echoes of a childish and undifferentiated self, rather than a symbol of my potential for rebirth and transformation.

The weather held fair, but the light drained from the days, so that by degrees our world became confined to the tight circle of fells around the house. And on the greyest days, when the cloud held snug to the land, that world became but a mixture of darkness and twilight. The silvery mist that hung in soft curtains from the capped fells seemed the brightest thing sometimes. Those were days when the light from our lamps burned from morn till night, and lent a dreamlike uncertainty to my memories of that time.

By now the Middle Eastern wars had cooled for a while and treaties were signed so that sporadic supplies of fuel began to flow, but rationing and queues had become the norm, also shortages of things on the supermarket shelves. The somewhat closed world of the Lakes adapted to this inconvenience, and bakers shops began to appear in Ambleside where once there had been hiker's boutiques. Meanwhile the carparks that had once beggared belief with their charges, lay empty much of the time and played host instead to makeshift markets where fresh meat and eggs and smoked fish and all the other necessities for a simpler life could now be purchased fresh - a necessity, since electricity and therefore refrigeration could no longer be totally relied upon.

Thus it was that in the world beyond our valley, the mood of many turned to self sufficiency. Our isolation in Drummaurdale ensured that we were ahead of the game in this respect and Charlotte, bringing skills from a former life on her father's city allotment, had already said we should consider making a vegetable garden. Beatrice then claimed knowledge of chickens from one of her own former lives, and magically conjured some up one morning, which she kept in a dilapidated hen cabin that I was to spend much time restoring. We would, she said, be much better off if we could withdraw yet more and more from the world, throw ourselves entirely upon each other. I went along with this, but not because I shared in their vision of homely isolation - I had other things on my mind. It was more only to please them, and to wait upon the indulgence of fate.

It was late afternoon, December now, the fells orange with the season's dry bracken, their tops aflame with a setting sun that no longer ventured to the valley's frosty floor. I was forking the earth of our prospective vegetable garden, half certain we should be letting the soil lie till spring. Charlotte was working a little distance away. There was no clear sense of purpose, and I was unable to measure my progress in the tangled vastness of the plot we had chosen. I could not imagine this sheltered fold of earth rich in produce. The coming year was impossibly far away and, in my heart, irrelevant.

"It frightens you, doesn't it," said Charlotte, leaning upon her hoe. "Looking so far ahead, making plans,... plans to be together. We three. You're afraid."

It seemed the storm was about to break and it would either clear the air, or

wash me away. "I'm not frightened," I said.

It's true I was not. I still feared nothing, but I was becoming ever more detached from them, forcing myself apart, as if preparing both them and me for separation.

Charlotte pressed home her point. "Having one woman under his roof is bad enough for a man, but two?"

I thought for a while, not sure what to say. "Charlotte, it's not like that."

"Had a man once," she went on. "He liked me well enough in bed, but when it came to making breakfast, he'd grow nervous. I could see it in his eyes. Not the committing type, you see? Bed was for dreams, but breakfast seemed too much like domesticity, too much like reality."

I smiled, barely able to imagine his fate for having crossed the fearsome harpy that was occasionally Ellen McBride. "You kicked him out?"

"No. I was married to him for five years, then he ran off with some floosy. No idea where he is now."

"Really!"

"Surprised? Well, I wasn't so smart back then as I like to think I am now. But this is *our* reality, Matthew."

"You think I'm eyeing the exit door?"

"Aren't you?"

"No."

"But there's something. As the house grows colder, it grows smaller - have you noticed? It pushes us more together, around the fire, around the range, around the light. You can't hide your thoughts, not from two women, when we're all thrown together so close as this. We were closer months ago, that time by the lake, remember? We were closer then, you and I, than we are now."

"That's not true!" I lied - of course it was true. "These past months Charlotte, with you and Beatrice, it's been the best time of my life. I have never felt so completely loved, not since was a child."

"Then what is it?"

"What is there left for me now? I no longer understand my purpose. After everything that's happened." I tapped the side of my head. "I mean in here,... after all of that, I was expecting more of a revelation - or failing that I was expecting the fates to take me, to blow me off a crag or strike me down with a bolt of lightning."

Her expression darkened. "Don't. Don't ever say that. This woman inside of you - is she an angel or a demon, making you think this way?" She stabbed the ground with her hoe, petulantly. "She can't have you yet. Anyway, she can

take you as an old man and make you new again - it's all the same to her, living outside of time like she does. There are other women who need you more. Here. And now. Or is it that you don't love us enough to want to be with us? Would you rather make love to that imaginary female alter ego?"

"I love you both."

That drew her up, stemmed off the flow of hot words. But a man had better be careful when he tells a woman for the first time that he loves her - careful that he understands his own meaning and can explain himself without flinching. "You say you love us?" she enquired. "Does that mean you love us? Or does it mean you are *in* love with us?"

"If I ache with the desire to be near you, always, does that mean I am in love with you?"

"I think it does, yes!"

"Then I am in love with you."

She was listening closely now, gazing, unblinking yet cool, and I returned her gaze unflinchingly. "But it's not possible, is it?"

She rolled her eyes. "Go on: spoil it!"

"This is not about marriage or wedding dresses or babies, is it?"

She sighed. "No,... I think between the three of us we've had our fill of those things. But why must it be impossible?"

"Because I don't know you. Are you Ellen or Charlotte. And who the hell is Beatrice? I knew a little of you before all of this, but her?... and neither of you know anything about the me."

"But are they the real us? Those other lives? What is any life, but a fiction, Matthew? Love is a connection that goes beyond identity, beyond names. You cannot fool love with pretence."

"But the purpose of our lives is to find a way to be happy in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We stand or fail on that measure alone. What good does it do us to slip sideways into fantasy whenever we can't face our reality? Look at us, standing here, dressed up like,.. like characters in an Edwardian novel. Who do we think we are?"

"You don't mean that!. Sometimes we must change our story, in order to bring ourselves into sharper focus - but it is always a story, always a fiction - what we call ourselves does not matter. What matters is what we are, we three, right now, this moment. You know all of this. You're just being,.... rhetorical! Matthew, you must come back to us. I need you to explain all of this to me,... not to have to explain it myself, to you."

Her eyes were becoming moist. Had I upset her? Was she so afraid of losing me to this strange mood? "You make it sound spiritual - the three of us,... here,... in this place."

She caught her breath. "You've said as much yourself? Do you not believe it now?"

I dropped the hoe and came to her. I locked her in my arms and held her. She was always the strong one, the sure one and I could not bear it when she lost her way. "I'm sorry, Charlotte."

"I know you're having doubts - and all of this because the gods tricked you into giving back your damned pebble." She forced herself to smile. "Maybe they'll return it. They did before."

"I don't know - but you're right about one thing: this is our life. And life is muddy." I kicked the soil from my boots, then contemplated the beginnings of a blister on my palm. "It can also be exquisitely painful."

"But it is still the mirror of our dreams. It's what gives them balance, as our lives are balanced and made bearable, made comprehensible by our dreams. You can't contemplate the one without a desire for living the other."

"Now you're starting to sound like me. Except it makes more sense when you say it."

"Does it?" She prodded the earth with her hoe. It was hard and stony - barely a few inches of soil before the uncompromising ring of iron on rock. "This'll take months to clear. You'd think those who went before would have done it already."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps we're the first to see things this way. You're right - we wrap ourselves in fiction. The purpose of things is not to make do with what you've got. It's to realise the potential that's inside of you - to reach down into the depths, and make real whatever it is that wants to be real. Otherwise you're not going to be happy for very long."

She sighed, then looked at me. "Our clothes, our costumes, they bind us, they place us in a story and stop us from moving on, into another - that's what was so liberating, swapping my own clothes for these, for this costume. All I have changed by it is my story, my name, but the person standing here is still the one that was born with me in the beginning, my original self, the self that stands each night without clothes and longs for you to touch her."

"Charlotte,..."

"No, don't dismiss this. There's something that still wants to be made real. You feel it, so do I. So does Beatrice."

"This is dangerous."

"Let it be! Make love to us Matthew."

"I'm not sure I can. I mean,... maybe to one or the other but now,... *both.*"

"It puzzles you, I know, but not everything can be understood before you have to deal with it. If you must rationalise it, think of me as your egotistical self come in search of its femininity. Think of Beatrice as that femininity. Think

of yourself as being finally restored to balance, by our conjoining."

"It's impossible."

"Why are you so afraid of this? Matthew - if you do not act upon it soon,... then we shall."

***

That night, I spoke to the changes, for they seemed uncommonly lucid of a sudden. They spoke of nearing greatness, which suggested a teasing revelation yet to come, but they also they spoke of the conclusion of a great crossing, which I could have interpreted as maintaining the steady course of my life, or making ready for my death. I sat at my desk, pondering this, for though the Changes seemed accurate in the image they had painted of my situation, they also avoided any direct advice beyond encouraging my thoughts in a certain direction. Such is their way at times - times when the gods are content to watch and wait.

I know that if the way of the Changes frustrates me, then I am not in Tao. And I was out of Tao because although I could easily imagine making love to either Charlotte or Beatrice alone, in the complete absence of the other, the presence of them both seemed to cancel out all possibility of a sexual union, a union of mutual desire. How could I visit the one of a night without incurring the quiet jealousy of the other. Myself I did not mind them making love to each other because I was a man and aroused by it, but women are different. I could not imagine them being aroused by their own exclusion from a private coupling. I wanted to keep things as they were, but Charlotte was pushing for more now. How Beatrice felt about this I could not imagine, but they had become very close those two and I did not suppose Charlotte would have revealed herself this way, had she not also known the current of Beatrice's thoughts.

Charlotte was reading by the fire as I closed the book. She wore a long, ivory cotton nightdress beneath a wine-coloured dressing-gown, her golden hair had grown long about her shoulders. For a woman touching forty, who had lived a difficult life, she possessed a rare beauty - or had she just grown more beautiful the deeper she had embraced her dreams? Meanwhile, Beatrice sat in the opposite chair, knitting a baby jacket in soft pink wool. Perhaps it was the firelight, but she too wore none of her years, none of her heartache and seemed that night a sultry beauty. This was my warning and I should have heeded it, but if I had things would have failed between us. Thank God I was too slow, and lingered until long after my escape was barred.

I was not aware of any unspoken signal between them, but Beatrice set down her knitting and crossed to Charlotte, then began to brush her hair slowly over her shoulders and down her back. Charlotte laid the book aside, closed her eyes and gave herself over to the pleasure of it, sinking quickly into a dreamy rapture.

At once the room began to crackle with that old energy. I felt it in my heart at first, so lovely a vision they were like that. They must have talked, I thought - they must have decided to simply *be*, to follow their instinct regardless of my presence, and I was pleased, but it wasn't long before the erotic nature of it sank into my loins and caused the usual reaction. I drew back what I could, feeling the energy rising to my head, a dizzying infusion that I allowed to pulsate there awhile, before pressing it back down safe, into the centre of my being. It was enjoyable and in a way you might not understand, it was innocent. But the energy kept coming; it was an open door, a flood tide. I had forgotten its power. I caught Beatrice's eye. She smouldered. This was more than a loving warmth, I thought: she was fanning the flames of a dangerous heat, seeking to breach my cowardly barricades by overwhelming them. It was not just Charlotte then who wanted this.

"I'll go up, ladies," I said weakly, then rose, but Beatrice was quick to check me.

"It's hardly late, Matthew,"

"Em,.. true,..."

"And we should talk."

"You're right, we should talk, but let's do it tomorrow, when we're fresher. I need a bath. I'm aching after all that digging."

She became impatient: "It's hardly late!" she repeated.

I moved to the fire and warmed myself, feeling the sting of her words. Her eyes were on me all the way, her hands frozen in mid-sweep of Charlotte's hair. Then, when she was satisfied I had settled, she sat upon the chair-arm, let down her own hair, and handed the brush to Charlotte - handed it like a baton, like a challenge. Charlotte smiled at my discomfort, then began to brush. At once Beatrice's pout slackened, and she too gave in to a dreamy rapture. The energy rose to the point where I fancied I could see it, like electricity, sharpening the outline of everything with a faint, flickering blue light.

"Beatrice is right, Matthew," said Charlotte. "The time has come to have it out. I warned you this would happen."

"Charlotte,..."

What did I fear? I had thought fear was gone,... unless it was fear of a return of fear. My thoughts were turning uselessly. "I know what you're doing, but this is a powerful thing, and fills me quickly. If I am afraid, it's only of spoiling what's between us. Being with you both like this is love enough for me, if to have any more would risk losing all of it."

She thought about this. They both did, then Beatrice shook her head. "Matthew, don't you ever want to lie with Charlotte? Or me? I'm not so simple that I could not do it, could not be with you both. And you,... I had not taken you for such a prude."

"But we do lie with one another."

"I'm not talking about cuddling, Matthew. No. I mean,... put yourself *inside* of us. I mean be a *man* for us, Matthew. Be a *man*!"

All right.

A man may decide he has risen above his desires, but what should be his course, when a woman seeks to remind him of them? Was this Pygmalion again? The man ignoring fleshy women for the dream of his ideal? Was this Ruskin rising above the inconvenient fact of his darling Effie's intimate anatomy, in favour of the so-called perfect form? There was perhaps a way through, but if it did exist it could not lie too close to either extreme: Ruskin's high aestheticism, nor Byronic self-immolation. Myrddin could not ignore the amorous intentions of Gwendoloena, but neither could he reject her - in any of her manifestations!

"I did not come here with the intentions of making one or the other of you my lover."

Charlotte continued to brush, acting proxy now for Beatrice's thoughts, while Beatrice retreated further into the ecstasy of Charlotte's touch. "I know you think it might be dangerous" she said. "And I know you have the curiously old fashioned decency not to press us, but what about wanting it? Do you not *want* it, Matthew?"

"What a man wants isn't always good for him, or those around him."

"All right. This is difficult for you. I've seen how you transform sexual energy, seen how it can satisfy the need in you without your needing to touch anyone. That may be good enough for you, and I'm glad we can at least please you in that small way, but it seems rather silly when there are two of us here who would enjoy your touch, and who would enjoy touching you. And then again, what about us?" Charlotte continued to brush Beatrice's hair then paused for a moment. "What about what *we* want, from you, Matthew?"

"It might seem a simple thing, what you're suggesting, but really its complicated and very, very dangerous."

Beatrice shook her head in gentle bewilderment, then smiled. "You're as bad as Joshua ever was. Speak plain then we can both understand."

Charlotte was nodding though, her expression darkening a little as if she had read my thoughts and understood them at last. "Matthew's right, my love. It *is* a dangerous thing. We must not think otherwise."

Beatrice shifted her weight impatiently. "Then explain it to me!"

Charlotte gave a sigh. "The simple part is this, my love: we build up the fire 'till it roars and fills the room with heat and amber. Then I help you to undress. And you undress me. Then we undress Matthew and stand before each other, and grow fat on our desires. The complicated, and truly dangerous thing, the thing that Matthew's talking about, is what comes after that. Are we

strong enough, and sure enough, do you think?"

The house was already aflame with a heat keener than anything I had known. I regarded them both, and the air between us shimmered. It would have taken only one of us to blink, to turn our eyes away and the heat would have been extinguished. Our lives would have carried on pretty much the same for a while, but before the Spring, I guess one of us would have gone, and those who remained would have had to make the best of things. But it would have been a pale shadow of what might have passed, if had we been able to stay together.

I saw this, saw perhaps crucially that I had to prove myself willing to at least touch the flame, without somehow going the way of all tormented and oversexed romantics, even though I knew I risked this being my fate. I could not possess these women: they were their own selves and they desired completion, no matter how eccentric, through both of themselves, and me.

No one blinked, though we thought on it for a long while, then as the clock struck ten I turned only a little to toss another log on the fire, to seal our fate, and Charlotte took this as the right moment to act. She laid down the brush, turned softly to Beatrice, and began unbuttoning her dress. Beatrice's eyes flickered wide for a moment, as if she had glimpsed the precipice yawning at our feet, but otherwise she remained serene. When she turned to gaze, with sure intention, upon me, I tried to remember the stricken, anxious creature I had discovered here in the Summer, the one I'd had to dance around, the one who'd raised a knife if I'd so much as stepped between her and the door. But the door was closed now, to keep the heat in, and I don't think she noticed it any more.

## Chapter 63

## The Loving Trinity

It's an unlikely thing that in a society such as ours a man could ever have two wives, two lovers or two mistresses, and live anything like a steady sort of life. The problem is our collective ego which seems to have grown so big these days we can hardly turn our heads without it getting caught up on something. Ego makes us jealous, makes enemies of friends and transforms our lovers into murderers when the love goes wrong. Ego forbids understanding and forgiveness. It forbids magnanimity. It is Ego alone that can interpret an idea in such a narrow way as to praise it when it suits its purpose and ignore it when it does not.

Min had explained to me how it was normal for any man to enjoy watching the Sapphic love-play of two women - but that he would only enjoy it only so long as he was not made to feel unimportant, or somehow peripheral to their needs - for then, even though he might have known these women for a long time, and known their ways, he might suddenly find he hates them if they seem so wrapped up in each other they fail to notice him. Similarly a woman will not permit her man to consort with another woman because she will read it as a betrayal of her trust in him. Nor will women who are friends or sisters share their lovers, for it is not in our nature - most of the time. Of course, there are libertines who enjoy watching their partners make love to others, and you may be one of them, but such a thing only works so long as you can convince yourself your partner feels nothing for this temporary playmate. In the age old menage a trois, such as that which seemed to be developing between me and Beatrice and Charlotte, a man has the pleasure of two women's sexual permission, and the women have the choice of love they make - the dark or the light, the hot or the cool, the inner or the outer.

But to love - to actually love - is another matter; to love in such a way is impossible.

Unless.

As I observe Charlotte undressing Beatrice, I draw the watch from my pocket. This is not to tell the time nor even to glance at it, but to determine more from the feel of its ticking, in what version of reality I am witnessing this vision. I discover it *is* ticking: this is not a mind-malleable dreamscape then, but one of the firmer realities. Charlotte undresses her like one undressing a queen, laying the garments aside and folding them neatly as if to tease me with the extra time this takes. But the quietness in her eyes tells me that to tease is not her intention and I see it more as an unravelling of the final layers of misunderstanding, the final layers of deceit, the dissolving of a name, of all our names.

How long does it take to unlace a corset, divide it, smooth its creases and set it upon a chair? Is there a minute, or a day or an eternity in it? How long to lift a chemise? My mouth is dry already. I am so very old, yet feeling an erotic excitement keener than anything I have ever known.

Charlotte dips her fingers into to the waistband of Beatrice's knickers. Curious things I'm thinking, these long, unlovely knickers - white cotton, voluminous, and plain but for a modest adornment of pink ribbon. No,.. there is no prettiness to these things at all and yet the flesh within fills them with such an unbearable allure. They are lowered with an aching slowness, and as the dark triangle of her mound is cautiously presented I fancy the scent of her arousal is drifting - the primitive in her, seeking the primitive in me. Charlotte, her head level with Beatrice's waist, her hands resting gently upon Beatrice's flanks, pauses a moment to check my reaction, to test my nerve perhaps for here she is, this strange archetype, the substance of my dreams, my life, my many times here on earth, this woman reduced to flesh, reduced perhaps even only to a vagina. Charlotte is showing me this vagina. Is it to be our vagina perhaps? Is that what she is saying?

Oh, how I long for that rarer reality, that time of knowing each other's thoughts. Why must we remain so trapped in our shells of perceptive dumbness? Is it so that only the most innocent of us can progress? It is true, I am thinking, that in the absence of a universal telepathy, only those who are by instinct innocent can ever hope to travel this road and not perish in the heat of midday. I am surprised,... by the scent of Beatrice, surprised by the sudden earthiness of my thoughts. Indeed I fancy I can now smell the earth, a forest floor, mushrooms cracking underfoot - the soil is fern-soft and fertile.

Charlotte's hands sweep slowly inwards so her palms are resting on Beatrice's proud bottom, and Beatrice's eyes flicker. Then she licks her dry lips and parts them as if to grant air for a barely perceptible gasp of pleasure at this extra intimacy: the heat of Charlotte's palms upon the soft, cool flesh of her derriere.

Charlotte hooks the waistband in her fingers and sweeps the knickers down. Beatrice steps from them dark and round, a pale skin, a thick head of black hair, and copious dark pubic curls that draw my eye. She is yin-soft and yielding and softly now she turns to Charlotte, unfastens the dressing gown and slips it back over her shoulders, unlaces the nightdress and slides it down, sheath like, to the ground so Charlotte can step from it.

Charlotte is more angular, her breasts more pointed, and they rise on short sharp breaths. She is trembling a little, and goose-bumped, though the air is by now so warm and close I feel myself in danger of a sweat. She is yang-bright, her eyes burning, and then they close in quiet delight when Beatrice kneels to lay her head against Charlotte's belly, her nose nestled in the curls of Charlotte's golden mound. Beatrice too has scented something and she breathes deeply of it.

Meanwhile I am trembling - every muscle in my body aquiver as if the electricity in me has gone quite mad and is switching from positive to negative at a frequency that is beyond the comprehension of my simple bones. And with all the aplomb of the sophisticated lover, I forget to breathe.

And then I faint.

They are laughing sweetly as they fan me back to consciousness and I am laughing too, delirious, sweaty, telling them I am all right, telling them not to be alarmed but to let me lie a moment between them. I'm aware that we are curled within the coiled Ourobouros of the rug. I can smell the smoky sweetness of wood on the fire as it splits and I can smell the women, am overwhelmed by their scent as they blur around me, their arms, their legs, their breasts - and all bound as one kaleidoscopic vision by the single silken thread of their gentle voices.

I find my head in Beatrice's lap and am drawn at once to nuzzle the moist fold and to taste her. I'm aware then of Charlotte drawing my clothes away, drawing down my pants and taking me into the warm and slippery well of her throat. And naturally, we seem to close the triangle of our forms, as Charlotte offers her own lap, her own folds, to Beatrice. And the night becomes a trinity of love and mutual pleasuring.

So,...

I could tell you everything we did, and it might satisfy your curiosity - tell you for example how many different ways there are for a man and two women to satisfy each other - tell you how many times I came without spilling a drop of seed, until the night had became a psychedelic blur, and the walls of my perception had become a soft cloud of lavender and rose scented perfume. But there are those of you who will want to know the why, as much as the how. And though I can easily tell the how, it is the why of things that most perplexes.

The why of it is an image, an image of a late hour and a fire reduced to cherry embers. It is an image of Charlotte lain between the loving legs of Beatrice while they embrace in sleepy satisfaction, and of Charlotte's derriere raised while I sit lotus fashion, swimming in a state between meditation and madness. I am slick with our love. I have taken the energy of these women so many times, drawn it to my brain, held on to my seed, as if in fear of losing something vital but once more Charlotte bids me enter, that she might enjoy the softness of the one below with the hardness of the one above, and she tells me now, to forget everything Ghita has taught me, and for pity's sake to simply let it go, to empty myself into her.

So I enter with a hardness and a rhythm timed to please her, and I am quickly drawn over the edge, glad to let go, to fall, to feel the issue of something long stored, long nurtured - but at the last moment Charlotte squeezes me out and with something akin to sleight of hand she slides me quickly down, and it is Beatrice who rises suddenly to take a decade of my seed.

The why of this is not clear. For now, I can only feel myself complete, and looking into Charlotte's eyes, feel her returned to womanhood,... and Beatrice,... some way to a self I've yet to know.

## Chapter 64

## Sophia and Beatrice

I am by the lake again, dream-bound, and I am casting a line into the waters, for I find these days I am fond of fishing. Aaron is already a young man, strong and athletic, as I am growing conspicuously older and less firm. He is home from university, spending time with the man he thinks of as his father. He casts his line beside me and we fish the quiet waters of the lake together.

Meanwhile, Amanda is reading, lounging upon a blanket upon the grass behind us. Sometimes she looks over her page to watch, and sometimes she slips her head back to breathe the sweet clean air of lake and mountain. Her breakdown is old history, and all I see as I regard her is the serene and beautiful woman I refused to abandon at the tarn of dreams. She is the woman I returned to from the wreckage of my marriage, the woman I pursued with a dogged determination, wore down with my declarations of love, and eventually married.

This version of my life seems complete. The dream grants me the sense that I am blessed with as much serenity as any man could ever hope for. She is Amanda, but the dream reminds me she might also have been Beatrice, mover of the spirit within me, the one I had been coming to but could not close with, because I did not understand the nature of things. I have the feeling, as I cast my line, that in another life it was Beatrice I chose but lost Amanda, and with her passing, all hope of this, a normal life.

Aaron calls to me and tosses over a pebble he has found glinting in the shallows of the lake, a pebble of pink veined quartz that I had found once, then lost, then thought I'd tossed away, and which now sits upon my desk at Cragside. It's just a pebble to him, something pretty, glinting in the shallow waters, but even to the self that I am in that dream, I feel it has a significance beyond the simple living of my life, that in another time and place, it might once have been something sacred, an Excalibur plucked from an enchanted place, a symbol by which I proclaimed my spiritual mandate to observe this, my human life, and my purpose.

I am confused now, but the watch is ticking on the nightstand - tap, tap, tapping us back to what seems the denser form of our existence - yours in whatever place you find yourself reading these words - and me, here at Cragside, the morning after an extraordinary night of love, a trinity of love.

The old watch marks time, a time still out of time, this curious time of the Lavender and the Rose, and beside the watch there lies a quartz pebble. It might be one of the many I have taken from the beck, or it might still be the one I chose a decade ago - that I did not really lose it. I gaze at it with hope and longing, not daring to reach out in case it melts back into the dream. But it

does not matter if this is not the same pebble because in any case the dream has blessed it, granted it meaning and I know my mandate has been restored - that I have not strayed further from my path, but in honouring these women, I have closed more tightly with it.

Then it is dawn, and I am lying on my side, my head deep in the soft lavender-scented pillow of Beatrice's bed. She has risen and drawn back the curtain. The light that falls across her body is flat and white. Though it's early for the season there has been a fall of snow and it has covered all the land from valley-bottom to fell-top. The little slice of sky I can see above the white fell is a uniform grey, and steely cold, rendering the outer world in monochrome, and silent. She wraps her arms about her. The skin of her arms and breasts are goose-bumped as she contemplates the scene. Then, she turns slowly and looks at me, and when she sees I am watching, she smiles the serene smile of her innocence.

"The world is all clean and white this morning, Matthew."

"Yes, it's lucky I chopped all that wood. Come back to bed,.. it's cold."

"I'm warm enough just now."

"And are you,... all right?" I ask, though my meaning is more: Did we go too far? Have you any regrets? Is it over between us now that we have changed this dream of ours into a touching game?

Her eyebrows twitch in mild amusement and her hips sway a little, I imagine, at the memory of what we did. "Would you prefer a simpler game?" she asks me, playfully.

A simpler game? Is there such a thing as a simple game any more? "Ours is the simplest game I know, Beatrice. Any simpler and it would be much too complicated."

She chuckles. "There you go again, Joshua."

But then I see a shimmer about the edges of her form and something awakens in me. It is the knowledge that although the watch is ticking, I am still on the sleep-side of my dreams, that the Beatrice before me is not dark haired, but blonde; is not softly rounded, but angular. "I'm sorry," I tell her. "I mistook you for a moment."

She motions with her eyes to the pebble at my bedside. It too seems to shimmer and sparkle. "You were missing something," she says. "I thought I should return it."

"Thank you. I thought I'd lost it for ever."

"It's just a pebble," she says.

"I know. I was reaching out for my past, I think, at a time when my past had already served its purpose."

"You have let Aaron go."

"I know. He'll soon be a man - and he'll find me if he needs to."

She smiles at this. "Don't be afraid to lose the pebble again. The surest way to find something is to stop looking for it. Also, symbols are only useful while we're absorbing their meaning. They can hold our attention while we learn the lessons of ambiguity and the undefined shape of things. But if we are not careful, we can value more the symbol than its meaning. Then its loss can devastate us unnecessarily. Move beyond your symbols now Matthew, live the meaning."

"You're so beautiful! I do not know this form of you. Are we to be married soon?"

She smiles. "I think last night was wedding night enough - don't you?"

I feel a chill and wonder if she has come to take my life, wonder if she might already have taken it, but before I can ask this she replies: "Charlotte was right: I might claim you any time - welcome you as an old man and it's all the same to me. We have a lot of life ahead of us. Remember that what you are becoming, I am also becoming. Once you would have taken me for your lover, then your bride - and I can be all of these things for you, but there is one aspect of me remaining that you have yet to know. You are ready. Not for us this time a bullet from the Boer, and a lonely death in the Transvaal. This time I am redeemed, and we *shall* touch the stars."

"But what are we becoming?"

"We become whatever we choose to believe we are, my love. And what we are, the belief that we are, becomes ever more clear with the passing of each generation. We painted a stormy picture once, remember? But there was hope in it too. We had the belief then and we have it now. If nothing else, it is the belief that the world shall not fall while you and I are in it."

"But we are not in the world. We are out of it. And it seems such a strange life in this lonely place."

"Joshua, the vale of dreams is the undiscovered centre of the world. It is indeed a strange life - but some of us it seems must live this way, so that others don't have to."

I am disturbed by a sound. It is the cheery ring of a teacup on its saucer. As the sound fades, I hear the watch ticking and I focus upon Charlotte's slender hand as it moves away from the teacup, from where she has set it at my bedside. All of this draws me from one reality into another, and I know not to fight the transition.

Charlotte parts the curtains, and the fells are gold and green beyond the age-run glass, but the view is shifted for I am not in Beatrice's bed but my own. I listen carefully to the sounds of the house, and even if Beatrice were sleeping in another room, I know Cragside is too quiet for it to be containing all three of us.

Beatrice has gone - not far I trust, for Charlotte is smiling. Yet in her eyes there is also a secret.

Timidly I enquire: "Beatrice?"

"Walking," she replies.

"Have we upset her? She seemed so aroused, so driven last night that I lost myself in her, in both of you - but did we go too far? I remember entering her, taking her. How I remember! But perhaps I shouldn't have. I'm forgetting she's so very delicate."

"Hush,... " Charlotte moves to soothe my fears. "You did not take her,... she gave herself, that she might take from us what we offered, and what she needed. You said yourself, we are the spark - but it is she who takes the spark and gives it direction. Gives it life."

"Yes, yes,... but,..."

She looks down and for a moment I detect an anxiousness. "Matthew,... all is well with Beatrice - with both of us. It's you who concerns us now."

"Me? But I'm well,... "

She shakes her head, bites her lip. "Matthew, you have been deceived and used. We can only hope you will forgive us."

***

We are on the fells. They are coppery and shining, though the sun is but a lemon glow on the Eastern rim. Charlotte wears a voluminous country-skirt and an ivory blouse with a heavy jacket. She is a powerful, energetic woman. I wear my old tweeds and carry a hunting bag which contains only a gabardine waterproof. We are off at a brisk pace, and we climb the long track to the hause with barely time to catch our breath. Then she leads me south, across the broad ridge to the ruin of the old chapel.

We are looking for Beatrice.

I half expect the chapel not to be there, or being there, have fallen ever more ruinously into the land, a land that seems greedy to reclaim it. However, it's much as I remember from our previous visit and I am relieved even more to discover the three graves still together - Charlotte Culcheith, Beatrice Owenson and Joshua Owenson. On our previous visit, Beatrice and I were Petersons, I recall, and the dates are different now, a few generations later, from the 1860's. We have crossed realities again, but regardless of the moment in time our stories remain entwined, so I know we have not lost Beatrice. Instead, I have the sense of tracing a thread with my finger, unravelling an infinity of possibility in order to arrive at this one version of things - we three, together, here, for this purpose.

Charlotte is looking at me now, and I can see she is afraid. It's because she is about to enlighten me, to tell me how much I have been deceived - deceived

by her and by the woman whose name I still do not know. But if one is a willing victim of deceit, then it is not really a deceit at all, but more the binding of one's fate to the fate of others. I want to tell her this, but she is shaking her head and biting her lip again.

"Matthew, before we go on, remember that I am in love with you, that Beatrice is also in love with you. That fact does not change,... as for the rest,... as for the rest,..." her words trail away. They hang in the soft whisper of the fells and I must encourage her to go on.

"Charlotte, that day you first came to Cragside? Do you remember?"

"You mean as Charlotte, or Ellen?"

"You were Ellen then. We talked in the garden, beneath the willow, and you looked up at the window to see Beatrice. You knew her from outside of the game, but that was not important to me. I forbade you to enlighten me."

She nods.

"Whatever was between Ellen McBride and Beatrice, or whoever Beatrice was before,..."

"She was Sophie."

Ah! "Her name is Sophie?"

"Well,... yes."

"Then whatever was between Ellen and Sophie was irrelevant to me. You were important only as the characters you chose to play. But things have moved on, the game is changing. I will play whatever game unfolds from here and accept it as my fate, my place in life, my way, my purpose. I will trust in it completely. Do you understand?"

Charlotte considers this for a while, perhaps wondering if I mean the things I say. "What if I told you that Sophie has a child," she says.

And suddenly things are much clearer. "The pregnancy! The knitting, the mysterious confinement. And the child is around three years old perhaps? Then Thaddeus is the father!"

Charlotte is shaking her head. "Thaddeus is not the father - I mean – of course, he was. But he isn't any longer, do you see?"

"Then who?"

"Well, you of course,... like she said. Joshua is the father."

Her eyes drift down into the remote southern valley where I can see the farm. There are columns of amber smoke rising from its chimneys, flattening out and slowly filling the vale up, cutting it off from the light. And shortly we find ourselves in that valley, another trackless fold of wiry, wind-blown grass and flattened fern. A beck fans out into its upper reaches to catch the rain. This is a very wet place, gathering up the clouds that drift in from the sea, squeezing

them until they pour in torrents. I can feel the moisture in the air now. It is heavy, thick to breathe and cold and I can taste the smoke from a hearth far below us. We are a long way from Cragside and, though I am not afraid, I feel this has always been a valley fallen beneath the shadow of tragedy, that we are perhaps on a mission to pluck Beatrice from the jaws of something eternally vile.

In the distance I glimpse familiar landmarks: the great gash of the Blackstone pass, and a twisting road silvery-slick with rain. Then, below us, in the middle distance and becoming ever more clearly detailed there is a lone farm in a field of mud, surrounded by the detritus of a carelessly commercial agriculture - empty barrels with ominous labels betraying the toxicity of their former contents. There are coils of rusted wire, derelict cabins, and vehicles - burst through with rust - all sinking into a forlorn wasteland.

And there is a man with a gun, come to inspect us. He is a reminder of my brother, now given up for dead, who I recall also carried a gun. He is nut-brown and wrinkled, like a thousand year old oak, like the guardian of a portal to the underworld, a grotesque, Homeric figure, and there is a mad dog barking at his heels, barking at us, at our trespassing from the lighter realms of existence, venturing down into this grim Bardo of mud and filth.

"Un wot dost t'ah want?"

He is speaking to us, challenging us in the dialect of these lands. What do we want? I am daunted, for surely I have seen his face in my most troubled dreams. I am daunted by his sourness, his hardness, and by the insane barking of his dog. But Charlotte glowers and the dog slinks behind the man's heels, cowed into silence and I am suddenly made to feel that we are untouchable.

"We've come for Sophie," I tell him.

He spits. "Tha mun keep her. Aye - unt brat un-all! Yer mad fuckers."

Is he her father, then? Her husband? He looks as if he might have been born old, gnarled and stained this way so that he might easily have been either. But these details mean little to me and all I can see is a ruined man, a maleness dead as old leather, petrified by his incapacity for love, for gentleness. In the mythical version of my life he is merely Thaddeus by another name.

I wonder briefly if I am to fight for her, to wrestle him down into the mud. The idea seems ridiculous, though I am resolved to do it if necessary. But then there comes the sound of a groaning door and Sophia, who is Beatrice, emerges from the farmhouse. There is a glow to her, and a sparkle in her eyes, as if she is caught up on some pleasant thought. At first she does not see us, but then she turns and stops and her lips press together in fondness and recognition. She is wearing the tweed suit I remember from a decade ago. It is not the same woman of course, but it *is* the same Beatrice. And following on her heels there comes a pale, moon faced child with a fine head of long, curly hair. She is clinging to her mother's dress as if blind, and stepping out into the

world for the first time.

I am unable to speak and can only stare, bewitched by the presence of this unexpected and unworldly creature. The magnitude of what it is that Beatrice has achieved comes slowly to me and I hear Beatrice, who is Sophie, who is Sophia, asking me: "What is it Joshua? Do you not know your own daughter?"

She glances awkwardly at Charlotte and something passes between them, but this is the only hint of their complicity, and otherwise the game is crafted well and fits my soul complete, fits snug with its odd plausibility. I feel it reaching out to embrace me, feel its love, feel its promise of reunion with a thing long lost - lost before ever I was born. Then I kneel down to take the child in, and Charlotte kneels close beside me, her breath curling hot upon my neck: "You did it once," she says. "Can you play this game again, with another child? A child that is not Aaron?"

"I would know my own daughter anywhere," I tell her with conviction. "This is little Bee. Of course I know her." Bee, short for Beatrice. So, there *was* a child, yes, and I had always known her name. So many incarnations! so many aspects of this one, remarkable spirit!

We return to Cragside - Charlotte and little Bee far ahead, hand in hand, while Sophia and I walk slow. What do these names mean? I am looking at her and seeing her for the first time, while she is still the woman I made love to with such fundamental abandon last night - made love as if a life depended on it.

"Sophia!"

She turns and smiles gently. "I'm not sure I'm ready to be Sophie again, Matthew. It was my name once, but I think I shall always be Beatrice now. Let me go on being Beatrice for you?"

"Of course, yes. And I shall be Joshua?"

"I think Matthew is growing on me. Though I suspect Charlotte favours Joshua - she speaks more tenderly to him than she does to Matthew."

"I've noticed that."

We take the valley route and drop into the Vale of Dreams directly, beneath the long ridge of Drummaur Fell, and seeing it, seeing the patterns of the crags suspended in their silent rivers of scree, I am reminded of the last walk I had with Amanda, when the time for our love was slipping like the last grains through the neck of the glass. Walking away from Amanda that day had felt like walking towards the world's end, a place and a time that could promise only bitterness and despair. But love has many flavours, many tastes and textures and little had I known that in fact I had been taking my first steps on a journey that would lead to a rare fulfilment - a fulfilment contained by the vessel of an unknown and mysterious kind of love.

I have felt the ghostly hand of that love many times - incoherent snatches of it

while I was among the mountains and the valleys of this place. A shaft of hazy sunlight reaching down into a thunder-glowery vale might do it, might raise the whisper of this secret thing, might turn my heart and make me wonder. Then again it might be a choppy lake shore, bright with daffodils, as a brisk spring breeze drives the waves to spray and makes their yellow heads dance,... or it might be a myriad other trivial things that need a human eye to see, and in seeing, in bearing witness to the world, feel the love that lies beyond our words, lies beyond the names we call things, and the names we call ourselves. All things are negotiable, malleable, ambiguous, and changeable. All things are ultimately meaningless - except love.

Except this.

"I had to find a way," says Sophie, suddenly, her head dipping and her eyes swivelling, a hint of the old sickness returning. "Had to make her born again. Born in love and kindness, and gentleness. Do you see?" She is pleading with me now, wondering perhaps how I can be so magnanimous at being duped into playing the role of father to yet another man's child.

I take her arm and draw her gently to me. She comes willingly - feels warm and safe with me. "Beatrice, it was a brave thing you did. You have been alone and lonely with this for such a long time. I promise you will never be alone or lonely again. But tell me, was it that you could not love her otherwise?"

"Worse, Joshua. I could not see her as my own."

"Yet you granted her life, when you might easily have ended it."

"A life is more than a mix of its parents blood. How could I take a life? Only I did not know how to be a mother as well, and not think of *him*, think of *it*, think of cruelty, and filth."

"I understand. She is the child you've been carrying since we met."

"Yes,... is that not too much for you to believe?"

"It's plain as day my love. And last night,... last night was the moment of love that gave her life."

This is not at all strange - this life we live, this game we play - it's nothing for us to ignore the proper order of things - sufficient only that they take place. It's three years since the child's natural conception, but this is the first morning little Bee has walked out with her mother. There is love and pride in the mother's eyes as she looks ahead and watches her new child: slender, diaphanous, but sure-footed and already familiar with this rough land, this strange land of ours. Then she looks at me. Be with me, she is saying. I choose you to be the father of this child, and in choosing you I overturn all other histories that might be written of this time.

"But the touching," I said. "There's been many a night when you could have had me in that way. Was it that you could not have a man make love to you,

without the presence of another woman? Could you not take me inside of you, until Charlotte made it all right,... took me from inside of her at the moment of no return and put me inside of you?"

She smiles. "Really, Joshua, you do think too much about things sometimes. Charlotte was there because I wanted to make love between the three of us - to give her bliss and feel you deep at the same time, and take your seed. I hope you'll never be so shy to love that way again. It's simply the way I am, the way she is too."

"How long have Sophie and Ellen been lovers?"

"Oh,..." She laughs. "Those two never saw eye to eye! Ellen is such an unfriendly woman, cold, unfeeling. After that bad time, she would come to see me. It was her job to get me to press a charge against Thaddeus. But all the time she would look at me like dirt, like something spoiled and weak, and fit for crushing. At first I thought it was because I would not go to court, like she wanted. But I came to see it wasn't that at all. She was just afraid - tired of being strong, but afraid of letting herself be weak in case she ended up like me. It was being Beatrice that taught me to see through all this, taught me not to be afraid of her any more, and it was being Charlotte that taught her to see me only as the mirror of her fears, and how to soothe them. Now we are neither of us afraid of each other."

"You make it sound so simple. But have you not thought that ours is a strange life - a way of life that might be confusing for a child?"

She has already considered this. "Look at her. Is she an ordinary child? Or is she a strange child, born to know strangeness? And we both know strangeness can turn bad or be crushed if it's never known love. Cragside is love. We are love. We cannot harm her. And a strangeness that knows love, Matthew, can change the world."

The sun grazes a crown of crags upon the ridge as we pass, and our long shadows run like fingers over the land. The bracken takes on a coppery glow, and the air is rendered amber as a single cloud grazes the heights. It is an odd moment, a glimpse of something that is both a memory and yet also an anticipation of things to come: Charlotte, walking ahead with the child, me in my staid old tweeds, arm in arm with this woman, a woman outside of time, as we walk together and talk of things that make a perfect, though wordless kind of sense.

There might be a thousand ways of explaining how this morning on the hills has come about, but none of them are as adequate as the truth, that it was no more than the combination of our lives that led to the simple perfection of this moment. It was something I could never have dreamed of, nor had the wisdom to wish for, but I knew in my heart that such a moment of love was the one thing I had always believed in. I felt it then, and I feel it still. And whenever I feel it, I feel also the world around me shifting down a gear. I feel it stepping back from the brink of madness to breathe the air of this

extraordinary time, the time of the Lavender and the Rose.

Meanwhile little Bee runs like the wind across the fellside. A wild spirit runs with her, tousles her hair, make her laugh. Together, they will do great things.

Michael Graeme

Summer 2008

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## Postscript

Thank you for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Although a work of fiction, the Lavender and the Rose charts a long period of deep reflection and psychological change for its author. The ideas expressed here were an exploration of the potential of human imagination, as told through the eyes of the main protagonists, who either were or became Romantic and mystical in their outlook - as did its author. A decade in the writing, the person who penned the opening chapters was not the same person who now writes this postscript. In revising the story for this new Smashwords edition, I have been able to remind myself of the turning points and the key ideas I now hold to, but which would have been incomprehensible or even preposterous before I began this journey.

Romanticism does not sit well in the modern materialistic world. The former abhors the latter, and the latter does not take the former at all seriously. But while materialism is a philosophy that well suits the simplistic machinery of world trade, it steals from human beings the simple magic of living. It is therefore a philosophy that cannot help but be ultimately pessimistic in its outlook, that human beings, human hopes and aspirations be viewed as perishable and meaningless concepts.

But, like the old Romantics, I suggest the world cannot be properly revealed unless it be through the lens of the imagination. It is imagination alone that colours the world, personalises it, opens it up for a more intimate dialogue. It restores our spirit, and reveals an optimistic and benign undercurrent which propels us more certainly along the course of our lives. More, it reconnects the individual life to its sense of purpose in an otherwise overwhelming and seemingly unknowable world. Through the Romantic eye, the world becomes, if not knowable, then at least sensed at a more vital level than that revealed by a knowledge of its materials alone, for materials are dead things. Through the Romantic eye, however, the world lives and breathes, and smiles at the wonder of it all.

Without it, the world frowns and suffocates in a self imposed insignificance.

Michael Graeme

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